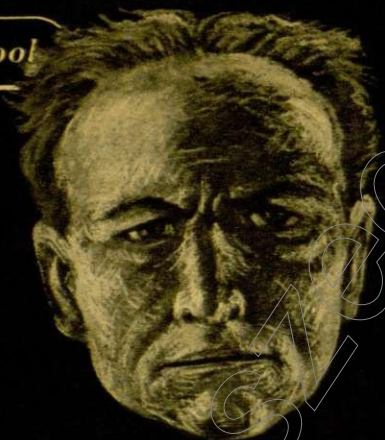


1946

Condensed Book



# HOUDINI

— his life-story

by HAROLD KELLOCK

Harry Houdini, daredevil and miracle magician, is part of the American legend. You see the amazing showman in all his moods, you share his dangers and triumphs, in this first installment of his biography. It was written from the recollections and documents of Beatrice Houdini, his wife.





# Houdini.....his life-story

by HAROLD KELLOCK

**H**ARRY HOUDINI began his career with a Midwest circus at the age of nine, and his first trick, perfected in secret in the family woodshed, was to pick up needles with his eyelids while hanging from his heels. From this humble beginning it was a long struggle to the role of master magician who thrilled world-wide audiences with his daredevil feats, his unsurpassed dexterity, his superhuman endurance, his mystifying escapes from manacles, strait jackets, prison cells, sealed chambers and chests, from a living grave six feet in the earth, and from a packing case, nailed by experts, weighted and tossed into the sea. When he died in Detroit in 1926 at the age of 52, he had been a public performer for 43 years.

Hundreds of thousands of people saw Houdini, stripped and handcuffed by police, leap from some bridge or boat into a stream or harbor, sometimes in weather so cold that a hole had to be cut in the ice before he could jump, and saw him emerge again, within two minutes, free and smiling. Other hundreds of thousands saw him encased in a strait jacket and hung head downward by block and tackle outside a public building, then



watched him free himself in a few minutes.

Scores of thousands observed him, on the stage of the New York Hippodrome, perform the most ambitious vanishing stunt ever offered by any conjurer. Directly over the big Hippodrome tank, containing

250 thousand gallons of water, stood a five-ton elephant, swaying in the spotlight. Then, in an instant—behold! that huge mass of living flesh had disappeared and the big stage was empty, save only for the smiling, nonchalant showman.

Finally, in the cities of America and in European capitals, Houdini mystified public authorities by his jail-breaking feats. After letting the police strip him, cover him with manacles and lock him in their securest cell, in a few minutes he would walk into the chief's office, free and clothed, shackles dangling in his hands.

What was the secret of these feats of mystifying wonder? Houdini's art really included many secrets, and largely the details rest in the grave with him. Only his wife was in his complete confidence, and in certain matters she was pledged to secrecy. In a general way, however, Houdini occasionally discussed his methods with a few intimates. His

great secret, in fact, had a double key.

"My chief task has been to conquer fear," he said. "When I am stripped and manacled, nailed in a case and thrown into the sea, or when I am buried alive, it is necessary to preserve serenity of spirit. I have to work with great delicacy and lightning speed. If I grow panicky, I am lost. The public sees only the trick; they have no idea of the tortuous self-training that was necessary to conquer fear."

"My second secret has been, by equally vigorous self-training, to do remarkable things with my body, to make not one muscle but every muscle a responsive worker, quick and sure for its part, to make my fingers super-fingers in dexterity, and to train my toes to do the work of fingers."

Intimate visitors to Houdini's home had glimpses of this miraculous capacity. Absently he would pick up a pack of cards and for half an hour exercise his fingers in manipulation, making certain cards appear at the top when the pack seemed hopelessly shuffled, all the time conversing on many subjects and paying no attention to the cards or his fingers. Sometimes he would take a piece of string from his pocket, tie it in various knots and drop it on the floor. Soon his visitor might observe that Houdini had slipped off his shoes and socks, and was untying and retying the knots with his toes, never once glancing at them.

His training for immersion stunts and for feats such as remaining in a sealed casket under water for an hour and a half was especially arduous. For months, several times a day, he would practice going

under water in his bathtub, holding a stop watch, lengthening the period each day until he could stay under more than four minutes. His record—in a public test—was four minutes, 16 seconds.

On tour, with winter approaching, he would take cold baths, a little icier each morning, to prepare for being pushed overboard, handcuffed, into frigid water and freeing himself on the bottom. His diaries record this Spartan preparation. "Jan. 7. Gee whiz! Another ice bath. They want me to earn my money!—Jan. 9. Took cold bath, 49 deg.—Jan. 10. Took cold bath, 48 deg. Doctor stops ice bath.—Jan. 16. Cold bath, 40 deg. Gee, it's cold!—Jan. 18. Taking icy baths to get ready for bridge jump. Water about 36 deg."

Sometimes, in rare confidence, Houdini would reveal a glimpse of his magician's technique. One day at the office of his attorney, talk turned to the opening of safes, and the lawyer asked if Houdini could really open any safe.

"Yes," said Houdini. "If everyone knew what I know about safes, they wouldn't be worth much. I sometimes wonder what would happen if a clever hypnotist should dig out my secrets and pass them on to the underworld."

"Can you open our office safe?" asked the lawyer.

"If you give me three minutes alone with it, I'll try."

The lawyer retired to another office. In a few minutes Houdini called him. The magician walked to the safe, turned the knob and the big steel door swung open.

Houdini, on a sudden impulse, said: "I'll show you a secret. No



one besides myself has ever seen it."

He took from his pocket something that resembled a watch case, except that inside was a single sensitive dial instead of two fixed hands. "I made this myself," he said. "It's the only one in the world. If you knew how to use it, it would give you the combination of any safe anywhere . . ."

**D**ESPITE HOUDINI'S constant disavowals, a legend persists that he had peculiar psychic powers. The legend was supported by statements of fake spiritualist mediums, exposed by Houdini, who would assert, after he had duplicated their feats, that he also possessed psychic powers. Even that honest believer in psychic phenomena, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, insisted that Houdini's skill was largely supernatural.

Houdini's reply was explicit: "I do claim to free myself from fetters and confinement, but positively state that I accomplish this purely by physical, not psychical means. I hope to carry these secrets to the grave, as they are of no material benefit to mankind, and if used by dishonest persons might become a serious menace."

Had Houdini posed as one supernaturally inspired, and had he chosen to back his claims by achieving "miracles" that could not be explained by normal means, he could easily have established an army of worshipers among millions of credulous people eager to be exalted by "messages from the skies." But fortunately, black magic had no lure

for Houdini. This short, sturdy, hawk-nosed man was a healthy-minded human being, and he lived and died a great showman.

Yet that description fails to do Houdini justice. Aside from professional genius, he was a rabbinical puritan, with much sentimentalism and a streak of mysticism. While he devoted his life largely to breaking physical bonds, he was also interested in breaking psychic bonds and communicating with friends who had passed through a door for which he had no picklock.

After the death of his mother, this curiosity developed into a passion. His experiences with mediums led him to war on frauds who tried trickery as manifestations from the dead. During the last years of his life, all his skill and showmanship were enlisted in this crusade.

#### A Magician Is Born

**T**HE BOY WHO WAS to be Houdini was born in Appleton, Wisconsin, in 1874, the son of Dr. Mayer Samuel Weiss, a rabbi, and his wife Cecilia. He was named Ehrich. He was the fifth child, and others were to follow. When Ehrich was born, the Weisses were newly settled in Appleton, having fled from persecution in Hungary.

As a boy, Ehrich was always prying into junk piles, looking for cast-off fasteners to study and treasure. His friends relate that he was never long in a strange room before examining all the locks—on doors, chests, trunks. In a few minutes he would be on intimate terms with all of them.

But the boy's great delight was magic. A traveling circus came to

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town and, wandering among the sideshows, Ehrich came on a conjurer producing bunnies, flags, ribbon, flowers, omelets, from an inexhaustible silk hat. Immediately Ehrich parked himself in front of that man of simple guile, and stared. When he did not return for supper, Rabbi Weiss found him between the conjurer's knees, being initiated into the mysteries of making a dried pea appear under any of three cups.

As the Weiss family grew larger, the Weiss income grew smaller, so when Hoeffler's Five-Cent Circus returned to town, Ehrich at the age of nine applied for a job as performer. Probably the manager recalled the youngster who had lingered at the conjurer's stand. At any rate he let Ehrich show his tricks. They suspended him head down from a rope and saw him pick up pins with his eyelids. He let them tie him with ropes from which he speedily freed himself. Ehrich was hired, and started his professional career. But when the circus left town, the career was abruptly halted.

Two years later, after Ehrich had spent much time hanging around the local locksmith, the man gave him a job. In a few weeks the boy was able to pick every lock in the place, and he made out of wire a little picklock which could master any fastening device with which he came in contact.

After a time the locksmith went out of business, and Ehrich was reduced to petty jobs around town. Even at eleven, Appleton to him seemed lacking in excitement, especially when magicians were tour-

ing the cities, winning fortune and renown. So a few weeks later he vanished without leaving messages, for he took no chances on being followed and brought back.

Ehrich wandered from place to place, working at odd jobs, doing tricks wherever opportunity offered and taking up a collection from the yokels. Sometimes he would come on a small circus or fair. "I am Eric the Great," he would say to the manager. "I can let anyone tie me with ropes, and get free."

Usually he landed a brief engagement and soon he was able to send a little money home. A letter from his mother followed. His father, he learned, had given up the struggle in Appleton and had moved to New York, where the rest of the family would join him when a home could be established. So to Manhattan went Ehrich, to help his father run a language school.

After the family arrived in 1891, Ehrich got his first regular job as a necktie cutter. But every spare moment he practiced magic and card tricks, studied locks and rope ties. He was constantly astonishing his family with his skill, and soon neighborhood entertainments included Ehrich Weiss, conjurer, on their programs.

In his 16th year a notable event occurred. In his search through second-hand shops for books on magic, he came across an ancient-battered volume, *Memoirs of Robert-Houdin, Ambassador, Author and Conjurer, Written by Himself*.

Poring over the pages, the excited neophyte found the key to miracles of sleight and illusion that had puzzled him for years. At last



he had discovered the key to the world of wonder which he had been seeking since a lad.

Ehrich quickly told his friend Jack Hayman, who had performed with him at amateur gatherings, about the wonderful discovery. Both boys were thinking seriously of entering magic as a career. Jack said that adding the letter "i" to the name of Houdin would give the meaning, in French, of "like Robert-Houdin." The idea struck fire. Ehrich Weiss disappeared forever, and in his place was Houdini.

#### Dime-Museum Days

A FEW MONTHS later Ehrich quit his job as a necktie cutter and he and Hayman struck out as professional entertainers under the name of the Houdini Brothers. But the partnership was short-lived. The boys could not agree, so Houdini substituted his brother Theodore as the other "brother." In 1893 they gravitated to Chicago and filled a sideshow engagement at the World's Fair. Thereafter Ehrich, as Harry Houdini, "Handcuff King and Escape Artist," appeared for a time alone at Kohl & Middleton's famous Dime Museum in Chicago, doing twenty shows a day for twelve dollars a week.

About this time Houdini fell in love, in his impetuous manner, with a girl who was to be his intimate and lifelong companion. He met Beatrice Rahner at a high-school entertainment, and after a whirlwind courtship married her in Coney Island, without either of them having given thought to parental consent. In later years,

Mrs. Houdini liked to relate a story of her wedding day:

"It was a long trolley ride from Coney Island to the Weiss home in Manhattan, but Ehrich's arm was around me. My people were very poor. By our austere German standards, public entertainers were beyond the pale—and I had married a showman. Besides, though the matter had not been mentioned, I gathered from Ehrich's appearance that he was a Jew, and in our simple Catholic upbringing a Jew was of doubtful attributes. It was long before the growth of tolerance, before *Mr. Dooley* and *Abie's Irish Rose*.

"I had no fear until we were standing in the hall of a tenement and Ehrich was knocking at a door. I found myself facing a handsome elderly woman with the bearing of a queen.

"'Mother dear,' said Ehrich, 'here is my wife. I love her much.'

"I felt his mother's bright black eyes probing into me. 'You love each other very much?' she asked.

"'Yes, Mother.'

"Then I haven't lost a son. I have gained a daughter.'

"With that, she took me into her arms."

WITHIN A FEW days Beatrice Houdini began to realize that she had stepped into a world far different from her former sheltered life, a world of inexplicable happenings which she superstitiously magnified into terrors. But as Houdini showed her how he did his feats of magic, the terror dwindled. Soon she accepted his strange goings on,

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as well as the fact that she was to take the place of Theodore—actually to go on the stage as one of "the Houdinis—Harry and Bessie." So in July, 1894, the Houdinis, described in showbills as "Master Monarchs of Modern Mystery," made their debut in an obscure concert hall. The partnership lasted through Houdini's life.

For the Great Houdinis, precarious weekly engagements in grubby beer halls and dime museums made up their beat, yet they were glad to fill them. Ten shows a day formed their routine, and their combined salary was usually twenty dollars a week. Mrs. Houdini did a song-and-dance act. Houdini did the handcuff act, sleight of hand, magic. Together they did the trunk trick.

In the fall of 1895, after a cheap circus tour during which Houdini had to double as the sideshow "Wild Man," the Houdinis began drifting about the country, getting

brief jobs at beer halls and museums. Stranded in St. Louis in cold weather, their baggage was held at the station with twenty dollars due on it. Houdini rented an unheated bedroom for \$1.50 for one week, and that virtually cleaned them out.

But in Houdini's mind, no matter how black things appeared, the present difficulty was merely an incident. Success in the end was sure, and this faith his wife completely shared. Toward the end of the week he came home one evening with a whole packing-box to burn in their rickety stove. Before breaking it up, he sat for a long time staring. At last, with a sigh, he began wrenching it apart.

"Bess," he said, "I have a new idea for a packing-box escape. I think I can get out without using a trick box. I'll perfect it some day, and we'll be famous."

Thus was the idea of the famous packing-box escape born.

#### The Devil and Mrs. Houdini

IN LATER YEARS Mrs. Houdini told this incident of her early married life: "Soon after our marriage there came a night when I really fled from Houdini, convinced I had married the devil. That evening Houdini laughingly remarked that I had never told him the first name of my father, who had died some years before. He told me to write the name on a piece of paper, then burn it without showing it to him. After the paper was burned he said: 'Now give me the ashes.'


"Then he bared his forearm and rubbed the ashes on it, and my father's name, Gebhardt, appeared on the skin in letters of blood.

"I was paralyzed with fear. In my early folklore, the devil, disguised as a handsome young man, lured girls to destruction. It was clear that I had married the devil. Suddenly I turned and ran screaming from the house.

"Houdini soon caught me up in his arms. 'Silly kid, it was only a trick,' he said. Finally he quieted me, but it was not until he showed me how the simple trick was done that I became completely assured."



**The First Taste of Fame**

 THE THING that gave Houdini his first lift out of obscurity was a development of the handcuff trick, which most audiences had gazed on without enthusiasm. There has been much nonsensical speculation as to how Houdini escaped from handcuffs under abnormal conditions. Many people have said that he could compress his knuckles so that they became smaller than his wrists and thus slipped out. Houdini could not do that, though it was not for lack of trying: he maintained it was physically impossible.

From many ordinary cuffs Houdini could release himself by hitting them in a certain spot; but he never let anybody watch him. For more difficult handcuffs he would use his picklock, a refinement on the little instrument he had devised as a boy in Appleton. The real secret was his profound knowledge of every lock and locking system.

How he managed to operate with his hands trussed behind him is another matter. There were certain shackles from which he freed himself by sheer dexterity and strength, and at least once he got out of a cuff into which a slug had been jammed so that it could not be unlocked. His exact process of working, as he said, would be a dangerous thing to let loose in society, even though few people would have the special skill to make use of it.

Late in 1895, Houdini conceived the idea of visiting police stations and offering to free himself from any handcuffs in order to publicize his show. The first place where this

feat drew newspaper space was in Holyoke, Massachusetts, where he walked into the police station, was handcuffed, slipped into a separate room and returned a minute later, carrying the cuffs in his hand. But in larger cities, police chiefs and city editors were too busy to waste time on a small-time vaudeville player eager for publicity.

It was not until three years later, in Chicago, that Houdini hit on a scheme for making his stunt more dramatic. First he made friends with several newspapermen, then casually visited the city jail and snooped around until he had learned the lock system. The next day he told the reporters he could escape from the jail after being handcuffed and locked in a cell. Nobody had ever done anything like that before; so the promised feat was news.

Houdini was duly locked up, and in a few minutes walked into the warden's office, a free man. His reception, however, was disappointing. The reporters had learned of his previous visit to the jail and assumed that he had taken wax impressions of the locks and then made keys to fit. There was no magic in that, said the skeptical young men.

"Suppose you strip me and search me before locking me up?" Houdini suggested.

They agreed that this sounded more like the real thing. His clothes were locked in another cell, and in addition, at Houdini's suggestion, his mouth was sealed with plaster. So they left him, manacled and stark naked; yet within ten minutes he strolled into the office with his

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clothes on. Moreover, he entered from the street door.

First he had let himself out of jail and dashed over to his wife at their lodgings to cry, "Success! Success!" By that time a crowd had assembled in the chief's quarters, impressed and astounded. But the real thrill came next morning. Houdini burst into the room, waving a sheaf of newspapers and shouting, "Bess! Bess! I'm famous! Look at my picture in the papers!"


Then and there all their money was spent for papers and stamps. All day they were busy mailing the clippings. Houdini sent one to every person he had ever known—or heard of. Thus began his career of public jail-breaking. Thereafter he escaped from the principal jails in many cities, and his collection of certificates from police authorities was ultimately to reach from San Francisco to Moscow.

Occasionally a conservative warden or chief would refuse to allow Houdini to test the integrity of his jail. But as Houdini became better known, the newspapers, as a matter of local pride as well as news value, usually forced the hesitant wardens to permit the test. "Perhaps our jail will hold him," was the argument, but nothing held Houdini.

His experiences included all the most modern American jails, fortress-like places of incarceration devised by the Kaiser's government, the famous Siberian prison van, pride of the Tsar's secret police from which no prisoner had ever been lost, medieval dungeons in which he would be clamped to solid masonry, and the black holds of

ancient prison ships in which he would be corseleted in leather and steel and chained to oaken beams.

Houdini broke free from all these restraints, without a single failure. Yet sometimes the task was tough even for him. Several times he emerged with limbs swollen or bleeding, concealing his exhaustion as best he could.

 THE PUBLICITY from Houdini's Chicago stunt brought quick results. One night in Minneapolis,

a stranger came up after the show and invited the Houdinis out for a cup of coffee. Seated in the restaurant, Houdini asked the stranger what he thought of the act.

"I think you're a rotten showman," he replied. "Why don't you cut out the magic stuff—it only distracts the audience—and just give a couple of thrillers, like the handcuffs and the trunk trick? . . . If you'll try this, I'll put you on my circuit at sixty dollars. If you make it go, I'll raise you. My name is Martin Beck."

Houdini beamed at his wife. The Orpheum Circuit! Big time! . . . It was too good to be true.

Beck's advice put an end to most of the miscellaneous tricks which had cluttered Houdini's act. Thereafter Houdini no longer produced an incredible number of objects, including live pigeons and guinea pigs, from a borrowed silk hat. The guinea pigs were given away; the pigeons were stored with a Chicago friend—who subsequently cooked them for dinner.

As his tour proceeded eastward,



### A Scrape with Gamblers

In Coffeyville, Kansas, one night after the show, two gamblers offered Houdini a hundred dollars to open the rear door of a gambling house after the place had closed for the night. They wanted to "fix" some paraphernalia. Houdini had no moral compunctions—he said that with gamblers it's dog eat dog—but he knew if he were surprised in the venture his life would not be worth a cent.

He refused the offer. The men accosted him again; this time he felt a pistol at his ear. Under this persuasion he went with the men. The cellar door opened outward, and after Houdini mastered the lock he jerked the door out so violently that he knocked one gambler down against the other.

Houdini leaped inside and snapped the lock behind him. One of the gamblers shot at him through a cellar grating. Houdini flung up his hand to shield his face and the bullet lodged between the bases of two fingers. He carried it until his death.

conquer America by way of Europe, as many a good American performer had done before. So in the spring, Houdini and his wife booked passage on a small liner and sailed, without a shadow of an engagement awaiting, to take Europe by storm.

WHEN THEY ARRIVED in London, they found the city skeptical about unknown Yankee performers who claimed superior powers. After days of fruitless interviewing he

met Dundas Slater, manager of the Alhambra. Slater watched some of Houdini's trial performances but was not entirely convinced. "If you're sure you can escape from handcuffs at Scotland Yard," he said, "I'll sign you."

"Can you go with me now?" was Houdini's reply.

At the famous Yard, Superintendent Melville ridiculed the idea that anyone could escape from his cuffs. Houdini insisted, however, so Melville produced a pair, remarking: "Here's how we fasten Yankee criminals who come over here and get into trouble."

With that he placed Houdini's arms around a pillar, snapped on a pair of "darbies" and stepped back with a laugh. "I'll come back for you in a couple of hours," he said, starting for the door with Slater.

"Wait!" cried Houdini. "I'll go with you." He stepped away from the pillar, tossing the cuffs to the floor.

This was enough for Slater, and he signed Houdini for two weeks. The opening night was eventful. As soon as the act began, a stranger calling himself "The Great Cironoc" leaped on the stage, proclaiming himself the original Handcuff King and denouncing Houdini as a fraud. For once Houdini seemed to lose his nerve. He permitted the intruder to keep the stage, thundering at him, even declaring he was not an American.

A man in the audience stood up. "That's not true," he said. "I am also an American and I saw this man several years ago doing his handcuff act."

The speaker was Chauncey M.

Depew. He resumed his seat amid applause. Houdini whispered to his wife, who was now on the stage as a page boy: "Get me the Bean Giant. We'll fix this fellow."

The Bean Giant was a monster cuff invented by Captain Bean of Boston, who had offered five hundred dollars to anyone who could escape from it. Houdini had solved its secret in a few minutes. Now he advanced upon Cironoc, holding out the Giant and offering five hundred dollars if the alleged Handcuff King could solve the secret. Cironoc frowned.

"Let me see you get out of them," he said.

"Lock me in," challenged Houdini.

Cironoc did so, whereupon Houdini retired to his little cabinet and in a twinkling emerged with hands free. Then it was Cironoc's turn. Houdini locked him in the cuffs and even gave him a key, but the man could do nothing. The audience gave Houdini an ovation, and the discomfited Cironoc had to ask the American to free him.

With this dramatic beginning, Houdini made a smashing hit. Each performance was of increased interest, for Houdini was a challenge to professional restrainers of all kinds, as well as amateur detectives of the press. Houdini met every challenge, finally removing even the small tent which skeptics thought might contain secret help. Manacled and fettered so heavily that he was forced into a kneeling position, he faced big silent audiences and freed himself in five minutes.

Houdini's career throughout this

in city after city Houdini proved that at last he had learned showmanship. Beck raised the salary to 150 dollars a week. Yet despite success, Houdini's curiosity for every phase of magic was still insatiable. Whenever he saw a trick, he had to know how it was done. Sword-swallowers, fire-eaters, strong men, spiritist mediums, sleight-of-hand artists—Houdini would stand before them, completely absorbed. Whenever he was missing, if there was a miracle worker or juggler in town his wife knew where to find him. He had to master all the details—who had invented the tricks, how they trained themselves, what the after-effects were.

In default of such contacts he would turn to books. Accounts of chemical and physical experiments, forgotten illusions, the newest inventions—all were grist for his mill. He was a magician not only during show hours but for nineteen hours every day. And his art would invade even the tenderest moments.

Every wedding anniversary, if he were within striking distance of Coney Island, he would make a sentimental pilgrimage with his wife to the scene of their marriage. On his way home, his arm about her, suddenly he would exclaim: "Bess, I've an idea how I can make that box trick better!" Fishing a pencil from his pocket, he would frantically scrawl rough notes and diagrams.

When, near the end of 1899, Houdini's efforts to play in the big show palaces of the East proved futile, he decided on a clever scheme. He would go abroad and



period resembled a press agent's dream. Each engagement, in England or on the Continent, was a fresh triumph before packed houses. Constantly he revealed new feats of skill. In Paris he palmed 32 cards with one hand. In Berlin, he was nailed in a huge packing-box and emerged smiling, and at successive performances he accepted challenges from carpenters to do the nailing. In London he delighted thousands by swallowing a packet of needles and a few yards of thread and, without moving from his place, drawing the thread from his mouth with the needles threaded at regular intervals.

Meanwhile Houdini's earnings were jumping. Near the end of 1902, his salary for one week at Leeds was a thousand dollars, and for a return engagement, 1,250 dollars. These were exceptional weeks. But only three years before, the Houdinis had looked on a one-week engagement at sixty dollars as a stroke of good fortune.

In 1903, Houdini decided to add Russia to his conquests. At secret police headquarters in Moscow, the officers first demanded some tricks, so Houdini demonstrated three-card monte and the old American shell game. None of the officers could pick the queen among Houdini's three cards and none could pick the shell that housed the pea. Then, when he suggested a test of jail-breaking, the chief, Lebedeff, replied that he might try escaping from the *carrelle*, whereupon the other officers nudged one another and laughed.

The *carrelle* proved to be a sort of steel safe on wheels, used for

transporting special prisoners to Siberia. First Houdini was stripped and searched, and he soon realized that he had never really been searched before. He was laid on a table and his body twisted and turned in every imaginable way. Then, stark naked, he was led into the prison yard, which was very cold.

Houdini was locked in the *carrelle*, but not until the door was fastened did Lebedeff remark that the nearest unlocking key was on the distant Siberian border. "It would be a cold trip," he added politely.

On the inside, the door was a sheet of steel, but high up was a vent, six inches square, crossed by bars. The lock was on the outside, thirty inches below. For half an hour Houdini struggled with the lock while the police chuckled. Then after a short rest he resumed, and in ten minutes the door swung open. Houdini was streaming with sweat despite the cold. He expected applause, but instead, he was seized and searched all over again. And the chagrined Lebedeff refused to give him a certificate of escape.

#### At the Top of the Ladder

THE CONQUEST of America began in 1905 when Houdini opened at the Colonial Theatre in New York as a top-liner. He was 31, and had been working toward this great occasion for fifteen years. Within a few months his amazing feats carried his name all over the country.

In Washington, Houdini broke out of several jails, but Warden Harris of the Federal prison, con-

fident of his locks, invited Houdini to match wits with Uncle Sam. Houdini selected the cell that had housed Guiteau, assassin of President Garfield. The walls were heavy masonry, the door was sunk three feet in a brick wall, the lock was a combination.

After being stripped and searched, Houdini was locked in the cell, his clothes in another, while Harris and other officials retired to await developments. Houdini was out in two minutes. Then he had a whimsical idea. There were eight other prisoners; he opened each cell and transferred the inmate to another. Houdini was still naked, and the prisoners were so amazed at this apparition that they made no effort to escape.

Twenty-one minutes after being locked up, Houdini entered the Warden's office, fully clothed. "I

let all of your prisoners out," he said, and then, as guards jumped for the door, he added hastily: "But I locked them all in again."

During the next two seasons Houdini made tours of all the first-class vaudeville theatres in the U.S. and escaped from every sort of restraint that American ingenuity could devise. Meanwhile he invented a new and more dramatic trick to replace the handcuff act. He escaped from a large iron can, filled with water, its lid fastened with a dozen padlocks. Enclosed in the can and rolled into his little tent after a committee had assured itself that no confederates were present, Houdini would spirit himself out in about a minute, leaving the can filled to the brim and the locks intact.

In the spring of 1908 he wound up a coast-to-coast tour in a blaze

#### Houdini's Trick with a Hat

ONE OF MRS. HOUDINI's favorite stories concerned the quick tempers that often flared in the Houdini household.

"Whenever I got angry," she said, "Houdini would leave the house and walk slowly around the block. In a few minutes he would open the door and toss his hat in. If it was not thrown out again, he would enter. If the hat was thrown out, he would stay away for another few minutes.

"One day he had been putting a new electric bulb in my room and he dropped it. I upbraided him severely. The second bulb also fell and smashed. At that, I treated him to an outburst and he fled the house.

"After a while he slipped the door open and tossed his hat in. I flung it out. This performance was repeated several times. Then a messenger appeared with an envelope on which was written: 'To be delivered in a hurry to Mrs. Houdini, then exit rapidly.' Inside were these formal words: 'Mr. Houdini wishes to inform Mrs. Houdini that the first globe fell but the second one slipped. He wishes to convey his sorrow and promises that the one that fell will never fall again.—Mr. Houdini, Friend Husband.'

"It was impossible to be angry very long with a husband like that."



of glory and publicity, plus a few dives into the sea, manacled, from the Atlantic City pier. At this time Houdini was 34 and weighed about 160. His body was like flexible steel. It had to be, to stand the strains he placed upon it daily. Now he was ready for another tour of Europe with an entirely new line of tricks.

For a time, swimming champions insisted they could remain under water in the iron can longer than Houdini. The performer delighted to take them on and had a huge stop watch placed on the stage so the audiences could time the contests. The best of the challengers remained under for two and a quarter minutes, while Houdini stayed three and a half. At this period he would practice holding his breath for more than three minutes while lying on a dressing-room sofa.

The most hazardous diving stunt of his career was performed in Scotland in 1909, when he dove from a tug into Aberdeen harbor during a howling gale. Harbor officials urged Houdini to postpone the attempt but he refused. A heavy chain was put around his neck, crossed on his chest, fastened to his arms. His hands were then handcuffed behind him. He leaped into the churning waves, and eighteen seconds later appeared with hands and arms free.


Later, in a Berlin restaurant, a Chinese waiter was gaining attention with card sleights. When the Chinese came to Houdini's table, Houdini borrowed the cards and palmed 52 of them, back and front, while the Oriental's eyes popped.

"That's no trick, gentleman," he said reverently. "That's a gift."

Houdini was enjoying life to the full. The daily strain he was putting on his body was such as few can stand, but he carried it off easily. Moreover he supplemented his stage acts with outside stunts, and was busy far into the night enlarging his collections of memorabilia concerning magic, exploring strange cities, talking with old magicians, and conducting a vast correspondence.

Finally, in November, 1909, he bought a plane in Hamburg—one of the early Voisin machines—and taught himself to fly it. The flights were naturally of brief duration, but at least Houdini got the plane off the ground, which was something few men could do in those pioneering days of aviation.

### **Daredevilry Takes Its Toll**

 IN 1911, HOUDINI was back in America, touring the big cities, performing new tricks. But there were signs that his over-strenuous routine was beginning to take toll. Before returning from Europe he had been operated on for an abscess on his body, caused by daily struggles to escape strait jackets. In Detroit, he was troubled with sharp pains in his groin, but continued his tour. In Pittsburgh, however, his condition became so bad that he was persuaded to consult a physician.

Dr. Wholly told Houdini he had ruptured a blood vessel in one of his kidneys, and that he must rest completely for several months. "By continuing your present regimen,

you would be committing suicide," the doctor said.

Houdini laughed. "How long do you give me?"

"If you continue as at present, you'll be dead within a year."

"You don't know me!" Houdini shot back.

He said nothing to his wife or mother—they were both with him in Pittsburgh—but finished his engagement. Back in New York he lay on a library couch for two weeks, sorting his collections. Then he returned to the road, still in pain but determined to carry on.

At the end of the year he sent Dr. Wholly some photos, showing his current escapes from strait jackets and the like. "Still alive and going strong," he wrote. For fifteen years, Dr. Wholly continued to receive mementos of the strenuous pursuits of the man he had sentenced to rest, on penalty of death.

In 1913, Houdini's mother died. She and his wife were the only two women in Houdini's life. After her death he was moody and distracted. For the first time he seemed to lose interest in his work, in his manifold collections and professional contacts. He even neglected his diary; his notes were sketchy, with an undercurrent of morbid preoccupation. He spent much time composing encomiums of his mother.

For the rest of his life, whenever he left New York on tour, his last act was to visit his mother's grave. He would lie there face downward and tell her all his plans, as though she could hear him. For several years he would find himself at intervals standing on the edge of a void across which his mother had vanished into darkness. From his youth he had had an almost morbid curiosity about what he liked to call the Great Mystery, and he was always making pacts with friends whereby, if one of them died, he was to attempt to communicate with the other.

For years, he tried by every means that offered to communicate with his mother. The nature of the attempts, their failure, and his disillusionment ultimately transformed him into a crusader against spiritualist quackery and fraud. Houdini's life was divided into two periods. His mother's death marked the cleavage.

(To be concluded next month)

*In the final installment: how Houdini devised new and more mystifying tricks, how he fooled Theodore Roosevelt with a "spirit" message, how he waged an international crusade against fake mediums, how he exposed "Margery," the famous spook, and how he met death—not while performing a daredevil feat but as the result of a college boy's prank.*

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PHILIP JEROME CLEVELAND

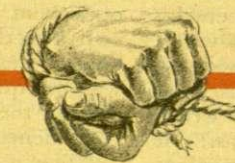
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Condensed Book



# HOUDINI—his life story

by HAROLD KELLOCK



PART II

## Synopsis of Part I:

Harry Houdini began his professional career at the age of nine. From a humble beginning with a small Midwest circus, he rose to world-wide fame as master magician and daredevil. In his 43 years as a public performer, his unsurpassed dexterity and mystifying escapes thrilled millions. Upon the death of his mother, whom he idolized, his career took a new and surprising turn.

him from dime-museum obscurity to world-wide fame.

His mother was his most intimate friend: her death not only left a gap in his life but turned him into a fervent crusader against spiritualist quacks and frauds who preyed on credulous people by professing to communicate with the dead.

At the beginning of 1914, Houdini, after triumphal appearances in America, was touring England and Scotland with his wife, Beatrice. His feats of magic and illusion, his escapes from handcuffs, strait jackets, wooden chests and metal containers, his underwater submergence stunts—all these enthralled audiences wherever he appeared.

June found him sailing for home on the *Imperator* with former President Theodore Roosevelt as a fellow passenger. Roosevelt and Houdini

THE YEAR 1914 marked a turning point in the life of Harry Houdini, the greatest magician of all time. The death of his mother the year before, his lamentations at her passing, his frequent visits to her grave, left an indelible impress on his character. Something of the youthful quality went out of him, something of his earlier joyousness and eagerness that had played such a big part in bringing



ini had much in common. Both were daring, impetuous; both were consummate showmen. One morning while the two were strolling on deck a ship's officer asked Houdini to stage a performance.

"Go ahead, Houdini!" Roosevelt urged. "Give us a little seance."

In the evening Houdini began with some card sleights, then switched to slate writing by "spirits." In this stand-by of mediums, the spectator writes a question on a slip of paper. The paper is enclosed between two blank slates tied together, between which a pencil is inserted for the "spirits" to use.

Roosevelt took pains to see that Houdini could not read his question. With back turned he wrote, "Where was I last Christmas?" He sealed the paper in an envelope and placed it between the slates himself. When they were opened, one slate revealed a map of the South American wilderness explored by Colonel Roosevelt the previous year. His whole itinerary, which had not been published before, was outlined. The slate bore the signature of W. T. Stead, English editor and spiritualist, who had been lost on the *Titanic* in 1912.

As Roosevelt had spent Christmas in the spot named, he was astounded. Next day he asked Houdini: "Was that real spiritualism?"

Houdini grinned. "Just hocus-pocus," he replied. But in an autobiographical fragment Houdini left behind, he told the whole story:

"When I went to the steamship company to get tickets, the agent whispered, 'Teddy Roosevelt is on the boat, but don't tell anyone.' I began to think what I could do

with the information, as I always gave impromptu performances on shipboard.

"The London *Telegraph* was beginning to publish the Colonel's story of his South American trip. At the *Telegraph* office friends gave me inside information and a map of the trip, as yet unpublished. Then I prepared my slates.

"On the night of the seance I asked passengers to write questions. Secretly I had prepared half a dozen of my own, and of course intended to see that only my envelopes went into the hat. They all contained the same question: 'Where was I last Christmas?' That was the question I wanted to answer for the Colonel, and by strange coincidence he asked exactly that.

"The morning of the seance I took two books from the salon and slit the cover of each. Below the binding I inserted a paper and a carbon sheet. Then I glued the bindings and replaced the books.


"At the seance, as the Colonel started to write with the paper in the palm of his hand, I handed him one of the prepared books to rest the paper on. Victor Herbert, standing nearby, said, 'Turn around, Colonel. Houdini will read the question by the movements of your pencil.' The Colonel faced away and scribbled.

"After he had sealed the envelope I took the book from him and, with my back turned, tore the cover and peeked at the question. It was the one I had prepared for.

"My 'message' from Stead was already on one slate as I tied the two together. Naturally the Colonel believed that I could draw com-

munications from spirits, whereas I was simply resorting to a material experiment in which blind chance played a large part."

The story of Houdini's astounding stunt was sent by radio to the news associations and gave him a flying start when he opened his third successive season on Hammerstein's roof in New York.

 DURING THE YEARS in which Europe was trying to exterminate itself, Houdini remained in America, his name flaring in bright lights from coast to coast. He was in his forties, at a time when men are supposed to slow up; yet there seemed to be no limit to his daring and nerve-wracking feats.

In Los Angeles challengers dared Houdini to let them bury him alive, manacled, under six feet of earth. He accepted and the soil was shoveled over him. Then he had a momentary lapse into panic that nearly cost him his life.

Suddenly he realized he was in a real grave, the traditional six feet below the surface. All his life he had been unduly preoccupied with speculations on the mystery of death. Suppose he couldn't get out? Gruesome fancies paralyzed his initiative for some seconds when breath was exceedingly precious.

Pulling himself together, he commenced to claw at the earth, but presently his strength began to fail. Then he made another mistake: he tried to shout, wasting more precious breath and choking himself with sand. Finally, more by instinct than reason, he resumed his mole-

like efforts and at last burst into the sunlight completely exhausted.

Houdini's largest trick, at least from the standpoint of volume, was making a five-ton elephant vanish. He performed this feat for a whole season in 1918 at the New York Hippodrome. No vanishing act had ever been done on such a scale before. To add mystery, the great Hippodrome tank below the stage was filled with water, barring a trap-door escape.

The huge beast stepped into a cabinet, curtains were drawn for a minute, and when they were flung open the elephant was gone. Houdini was smilingly evasive about the trick. "Even the elephant doesn't know how it's done," was his reply to inquisitive persons.

During the same season at the Hippodrome, Houdini brought his famous needle trick to perfection. He appeared to swallow 200 needles and 120 feet of thread, drinking a glass of water "to wash them down." When he pulled the thread out of his mouth with the needles strung on it, it reached all the way across the great stage. Surgeons came to inspect Houdini's mouth as well as the thread and needles, but they went away baffled.

Toward the close of the war, Houdini plunged into motion pictures with all-absorbing enthusiasm. His motivation appeared twofold: first, films offered a medium for preserving his feats for posterity; second, they seemed an easy way of earning money for later years.

However, despite Houdini's heroic efforts, none of the pictures was a financial success. The public was so accustomed to fabricated film



thrills that Houdini's genuine feats aroused no great enthusiasm. The average audience probably assumed that the more difficult stunts were simply screen illusions.

By that time, however, Houdini's excitement over pictures was beginning to fade before his interest in exposing the frauds in spiritualism. He was girding for his greatest crusade, and beside this motion pictures seemed unimportant.

**W**HEN HOUDINI sailed for England in 1920, the newest Funk & Wagnalls' dictionary contained the following:

"HOUDINI, HARRY (1874—). American mysticist, wizard and expert in extrication and self-release. HOUDINIZE, v.t. To release or extricate oneself (from confinement, bonds and the like), as by wriggling out."

In the language of the street, "to do a Houdini" had become a common expression for vanishing, breaking away. Throughout the U.S., Houdini was the symbol of elusiveness and illusion.

By directors of American vaudeville, Houdini was rated in a class by himself. Executives like Albee and Beck described him as the "greatest showman since Barnum." Yet Houdini was not always easy to deal with. Once he had reached the peak of star-billing, woe to the manager who failed to accord him all the prerogatives. Once when Houdini was playing at Hammerstein's, he agreed to permit the name of a woman performer to stand on the electric signs just under his, in letters almost as large. The

lady's ambitious manager had photos made of the signs, erased Houdini's name, and in all theatrical papers ran pictures showing his principal apparently heading the bill. When Houdini saw the pictures he smashed the furniture in the offending manager's office, demanded damages from innocent editors, and gave everybody at Hammerstein's a most unpleasant week.

His relations with his assistants were stormy yet deeply affectionate. One, Franz Kukol, was with him twenty years. James Collins and James Vickery served eighteen years. All three adored Houdini: they carried him to his grave. Yet several times a month he would quarrel with one or another of them and give him notice to quit. None ever paid any attention, and next day Houdini would forget all about the angry dismissal.

Houdini never raised the salaries of his employees. He simply never thought about such matters. At intervals his assistants would raise their pay simply by going to the secretary, Miss Julia Sawyer, and telling her to increase the weekly check. Mrs. Houdini occasionally became alarmed at the swelling payroll, but Houdini would cry impatiently, "Of course that raise is okay, Bess. Think of the high cost of living!"

Houdini never wearied of performing or doing other favors for children and old persons. When he produced bouquets out of thin air, any white-haired woman in the audience would have a rose tossed into her lap with a gesture that was more than mere showmanship.

Houdini's love for children was

a byword among managers. Hardly a week went by that he did not perform at a hospital or an orphan asylum, and he invited the inmates in blocks to his regular stage shows. He even invented a whole performance for blind children.

Playing in Edinburgh, Scotland, in cold weather, Houdini was shocked to see boys and girls on the streets without shoes. He bought three hundred pairs and invited all shoeless children to the theatre. His fellow performers became infected with his enthusiasm, and the whole cast volunteered as shoe fitters.

In money matters, Houdini remained a child. His personal wants were simple; he rarely carried cash, for if he started out with any, he would turn his pockets inside out for the first beggar he met. He would order dinner for friends at some hotel or restaurant and serenely walk out without thinking to pay. Taxi drivers became used to having Houdini hop out of the car and vanish, leaving only a cheerful "Good night." They would collect later.

**Y**ET WITH all his odd traits, Houdini never ceased to be a romanticist. He was never too busy to compose an elaborate love letter to his wife. After the death of his mother, he wrote such a letter every day up to his death. If at home, he would hide them around the house, as parents hide Easter eggs for children. For six months after his death until she sold their house and moved away, Mrs. Houdini discovered them at intervals.

When Houdini's mother lay on her deathbed in 1913, her last moments were consumed in a desperate effort to convey a message for her son, far away in Europe. Facial paralysis proved too strong and the message was never framed, though at the end she was able to speak his name.

The blocked message never ceased to fret Houdini. A breaker of all mundane barriers, he seemed to stand before a door against which no picklock prevailed. He often discussed with his wife the baffling problem. On visits to his mother's grave, the idea of communication was foremost in his thoughts.

Almost since boyhood Houdini had been keenly interested in spiritualistic mediums. Whenever he heard of an unusual performance he went to see it. In all his studies he never observed any phenomena—from mind-reading and spirit messages to levitation and materialization—which he was unable to reproduce under similar conditions by natural means.

After his mother's death, Houdini's interest in "spirits" became a curious blend, in which his passion for exposing fraud was mingled with his desire to recover her lost message. He put his hope to the test so often it was remarkable any remained. Toward the end, when he had satisfied himself that hundreds of mediums were frauds, he retained a curiosity about the possibility of posthumous communication. His pacts with his friends show that.

According to his pact with his wife, after his death she was to attempt a tryst with him once a week. Each Sunday at a fixed hour she



was to take her favorite photograph of him, sit with it, concentrate on communication. If something of him survived, he would give a sign. But at the time of Mrs. Houdini's death in 1943, there had been no result.

During his tour of Britain in 1920, Houdini attended more than a hundred seances, sometimes visiting two in a day. He had long talks with various Britishers who had exposed frauds. He also visited Sir Arthur and Lady Conan Doyle, and heard the other side of the case: "Sir Arthur told me he had spoken six times with his son. No possible chance for trickery."

In 1922, Doyle was lecturing in America and invited Houdini to visit him in Atlantic City. On June 17, he asked Houdini to permit Lady Doyle, known as an automatic writer, to give him a seance.

"I walked to the Doyles' suite," wrote Houdini. "Sir Arthur drew the shades and we three sat around a table on which were pencils and a writing pad, placing our hands on the surface. I was *willing* to believe, even *wanted* to believe. With a beating heart I waited, hoping that I might once more feel the presence of my beloved Mother. . . ."

"Presently Lady Doyle was seized by a spirit." Her hand beat on the table, her body shook, she started writing. As she finished each page, Sir Arthur handed it to me."

Houdini read: "Oh, my darling, thank God, thank God, at last I'm through—I've tried, oh, so often—now I am happy. Why, of course I want to talk to my own beloved boy. . . . Never had a mother such a son—tell him not to grieve—soon he'll get all the evidence he is so

anxious for. Yes, we know. . . ."

Thus for page after page, to the end: "A happiness awaits him that he has never dreamed of—tell him how close I am all the while—his eyes will soon be opened. Good-bye again—God's blessing on you all."


Houdini had no doubt of Lady Doyle's sincerity, but his polite manner concealed keen disappointment. For him the message had no reality. He could not understand how his mother could talk in English, when she spoke hardly a word of that language, or how she could omit completely all the tender phrases she had used in addressing him when alive. Finally, the day was the anniversary of his mother's birth, and it was inconceivable that her spirit would make no reference to Houdini's "most holy holiday."

Thereafter the exposure of spiritualistic fraud absorbed Houdini more and more. Traveling in eastern cities, he would give a talk to the audience during the intermission, usually on spiritualism, and duplicate some of the commoner pranks of the spooks.

In the spring Houdini threw his first challenge at the mediums, wagering five thousand dollars that he could duplicate any phenomenon. Doyle, on another lecture, was also in the West, and when the two reached Denver at the same time a newspaper published a front-page banner that Sir Arthur would materialize the spirit of his own mother to win Houdini's five thousand dollars. Sir Arthur rushed to the theatre where Houdini was playing to deny the story.

Naturally newspapers played up the Doyle-Houdini controversy.

They were not infrequently misquoted in their references to each other, and Sir Arthur finally wrote to his antagonist: "How long a private friendship can survive such an ordeal, I do not know." But the men had too much affection for each other to break, and their friendship survived to the end.

 IN 1923 Houdini was beginning to lecture at churches and universities on the subject that engrossed him. At the University of Illinois, the presiding professor was apparently alarmed at having a showman address the students, for he warned Houdini to be brief. When the chairman snapped his fingers, the magician was to withdraw. But the fingers were never snapped. Houdini spoke for an hour.

The current of Houdini's life seemed changed. He had become a crusader, sternly battling a fraud that he considered a menace to society. The highest paid performer in Big Time, he elected to tour the provinces in one-night stands as a lecturer, at lecturer's wages. Some irresistible urge now made it impossible for him ever to be merely an entertainer again.

About this time Houdini's book, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, was published and contributed to the general uproar about apparitions. But still bigger game loomed ahead in the person of "Margery," labeled by a psychologist as "the most brilliant star of alleged psychical mediumship that America has seen in fifty years."

Margery had started her perform-

ances in 1923, but she first came prominently to Houdini's attention with the appearance of two intriguing articles about her by J. M. Bird, associate editor of *Scientific American*. Her psychic control purported to be "Walter," the spirit of her brother. He not only displayed his presence by tipping and rapping a table; he started a victrola, stopped and started a grandfather's clock, even transported a live pigeon into the room without smashing a window.

When Houdini was called into consultation, some fifty seances had been held under auspices of the zealous Mr. Bird. The medium lived in Boston. She was Mrs. Mina Crandon, wife of Dr. L. R. G. Crandon, a surgeon. One phenomenon that had greatly impressed visitors was the ringing of a bell.

The bell was in a wooden box containing dry batteries. The box would be placed near the medium, her hands would be held and her feet pressed down on either side, and presumably the bell would be rung vigorously by "Walter." It should be added, however, that under the rules established by "Walter," one of the hand-holders must be Margery's husband.

At Houdini's seance in the Crandon home, he sat on Mrs. Crandon's left, Dr. Crandon on her right. Mr. Bird was seated so that his hand was placed over the clasped hands of the Crandons. The bell box was placed between Houdini's feet. He held the medium's left hand, and his right leg pressed her left ankle.

Houdini had prepared for the occasion by wearing a tight rubber bandage on his right leg throughout the day. When he removed it in the



evening, the leg was extraordinarily sensitive. While in his position as a "control," he rolled his trouser-leg above the knee.

"As the seance progressed," he wrote, "I could distinctly feel her ankle slowly sliding as it pressed mine while she gained space to raise her feet off the floor and touch the box. To the ordinary sense of touch, the contact would seem the same while this was being done.

"When she had finally maneuvered her foot to the top of the box, the bell ringing began and I *positively felt* her leg flex as she repeatedly touched the apparatus. There is no question. *She did this*. Then, when the ringing was over, I plainly *felt her leg slide* back into its original position."

This was only the first of a series of complicated seances at which Houdini used his skill to expose Margery. At the end of his experiments, Houdini asserted that "everything that took place was a deliberate and conscious fraud."

Meanwhile from coast to coast Margery was elbowing first-class murders and bootleg scandals from the front page. Hundreds were taking their pens in hand to excoriate Margery and the spooks or to defend them. Houdini, on a lecture tour to the Pacific and back, denounced Margery and reproduced some of her manifestations before applauding crowds.

Margery's former husband, a grocer, leaped into the fray with the statement that the story of her psychic powers was "bunk." On the same date the papers stated that "Walter" had announced on the authority of the spirit world that

Houdini would die within the year. Houdini hastily called the world to witness that if he died within the year, it was pure coincidence.

In January, he appeared in Boston and deposited five thousand dollars at the Mayor's office to be paid to Margery or any other medium who would perform in public any mystery that he could not expose and explain. On that day and the next he gave exhibitions before packed houses, showing how Margery caused "spirits" to ring bells, tip tables, float megaphones through the air and write messages.

Shortly after his exposure of Margery, Houdini, in the full heat of the crusader, set out on another nation-wide lecture tour. More and more the lecture merged into a fascinating show in which Houdini managed to give the spectators all the spooky thrills and at the same time show how the thing was done. It was all a great performance, and everywhere Houdini left behind him a trail of newspaper crusades against local mediums.

Early in 1926, Houdini made a pilgrimage to Washington to enlist President Coolidge's aid in his campaign to "abolish the criminal practices of spirit mediums and other charlatans who cheat grief-stricken people with alleged messages from the dead." As a result, Senator Copeland and Congressman Bloom introduced a joint resolution in Congress designed to curb the evil. Hearings were held by Senate and House committees.

The sessions were crowded with clairvoyants, astrologists, fortune-tellers and other psychic professors, all in a state of combusive indigna-

by Harold Kellock

tion. Houdini was denounced as an atheist, as mentally deranged, as the secret agent of a Jewish conspiracy to undermine the Christian faith, as a tool of the Pope. On the record, Houdini had the better of the argument. But in Congress discretion is the better part of valor, and the bill was never reported.

Back in New York at the end of his strenuous season, Houdini undertook the most difficult physical feat of his career. He found the city intrigued by the exploits of one Rahman Bey, an Egyptian fakir who professed to suspend animation in his body. At a local theatre, in his self-imposed trance, he permitted himself to be shut in an airtight coffin for ten minutes or more, then he would emerge alive and bowing. The trances appeared to baffle physicians and physiologists, and were giving quite a lift to local spookery.

Houdini determined to spike the claim, and immediately practiced slow breathing and staying under water. After a few weeks he announced he could keep alive longer than the fakir. Rahman Bey was in his twenties, Houdini at the high-blood-pressure age of 52.

The trial was made before a medical committee in the Hotel Shelton swimming pool. Houdini was put in a metal coffin in which physicians estimated there was enough air to last for fifteen minutes.

"If I die," he said before the lid was sealed, "it will be the will of God and my own foolishness."

The coffin was lowered into the pool, where relays of swimmers took turns holding it under water. Not until an hour and 31 minutes had

elapsed did Houdini signal to be released. He was exhausted, with blood pressure, respiration and temperature all abnormal, but the symptoms passed in a short time.

THE VIGOR AND sincerity with which Houdini conducted his spook crusade had won him public esteem. Newspapers hailed him as one of the country's most valued citizens. He had come a long way from the days of obscurity when Dime-Museum Harry sat up nights inventing new tricks to eke out a bare existence. Yet, though his scope and purpose had expanded to larger horizons, he still burned midnight oil over his work, and his inventiveness and curiosity were unabated. When he reopened his show in the fall of 1926, he was full of fresh projects for the future, which included a more comprehensive plan of attack against fraud. But fate was to intervene.

In Montreal, Houdini delivered a lecture on spiritualism at McGill University. One student made a sketch of the lecturer, and Houdini was so pleased that he invited the young man to call later in the week and make additional sketches.

The student arrived at the theatre Friday morning with a friend. The two sat in Houdini's dressing room while he lay on a couch, reading his mail. Presently a third student came in and the talk turned to physical endurance. The newcomer asked if it were true that Houdini could withstand heavy physical blows. The magician said he could if he had warning to brace himself.



Then he picked up some letters.

The next moment Houdini was startled by receiving a series of sharp blows on the abdomen. At the fourth blow he stopped the young man with a gesture, just as the other two students jumped up in protest.

The boys left shortly afterward, and Houdini rubbed his abdomen for a few minutes, assuming the pain was muscular. But in the evening the pains grew more acute, especially at the end of the performance. He could not sleep that night.

In the morning he fell into a doze, and nearly fell asleep several times during the matinee. He went through the evening act with difficulty. During the intermission he lay on a couch in a cold sweat and was unable to dress himself after the show.

That was Saturday night. He had to make a train for Detroit, where the show was to open the next evening. Houdini was so ill on the train that attendants wired a doctor to meet him at the station. His temperature was 102. Physicians insisted he cancel his performance: his symptoms indicated acute appendicitis. Houdini doggedly declared he must go on. Before the curtain went up his temperature was 104.

That was a curious performance, with the magician, suave and smiling, forcing himself through his exacting repertoire, though every motion was a torture. At the end of the long first act, he fell down on the stage. At the final curtain he was in a state of collapse.

He was removed to the hospital and surgeons operated immediately. To the orderlies Houdini boasted,

"Say, I can still lick both of you."

The doctors agreed he could not live more than twelve hours. When he came out of the ether, Houdini sensed their decision, so he centered his energies to do battle with *streptococcus virulens*.

The twelve hours passed, and the hours merged into days. In a medical sense each day was a miracle. Houdini never lost consciousness, and he never ceased fighting. Once a day his wife was taken to his bedside for a brief visit.

At the end of seven days—it was Sunday, October 31—Houdini said to his brother, Theodore, at his bedside: "I'm tired of fighting, Dash. I guess this thing is going to get me."

He lay quiet for a period, his eyes closed. When he reopened them his wife's arms were about him. She was crying. He could not speak, but his glance rested on her face for a long moment before his head fell back on the pillow.

Most of the Houdini properties had been shipped back to New York, for it was plain that even if he recovered, the tour was ended. But the metal coffin in which Houdini had performed his last great feat of endurance was still at the theatre. His body was placed in it for shipment to New York, and later he was buried in it.

Among his personal effects Mrs. Houdini found his last letter: "Sweetheart, when you read this I shall be dead. Dear Heart, do not grieve; I shall be at rest by the side of my beloved parents, and wait for you always—remember! I loved only two women in my life: my mother and my wife. Yours, in Life, Death, and Ever After."