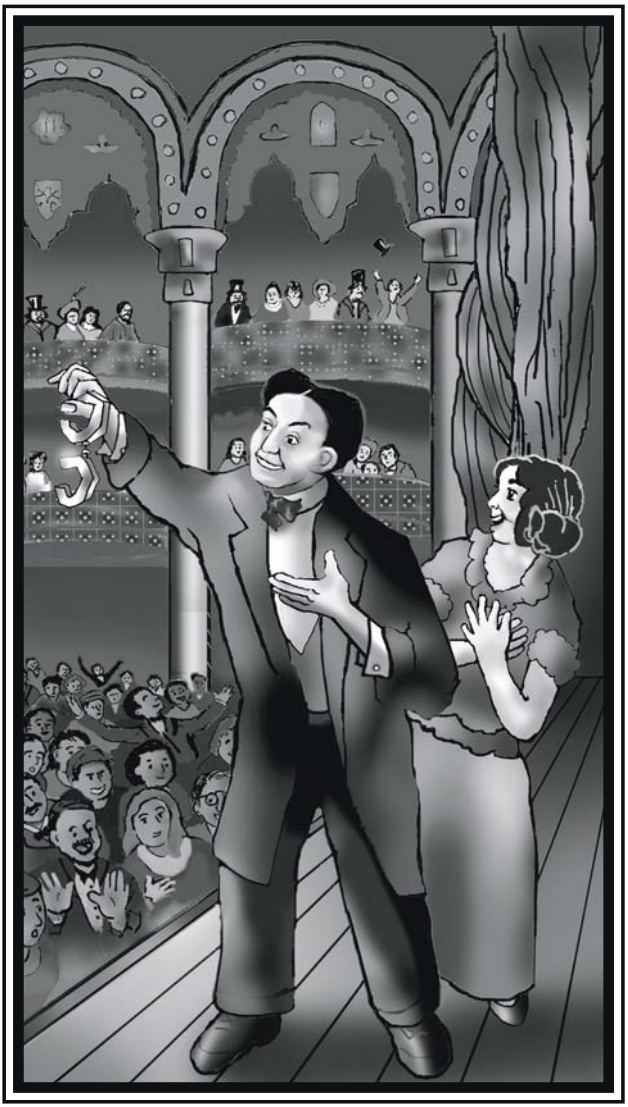
Professor Solomon's

LIVES OF THE CONJURERS

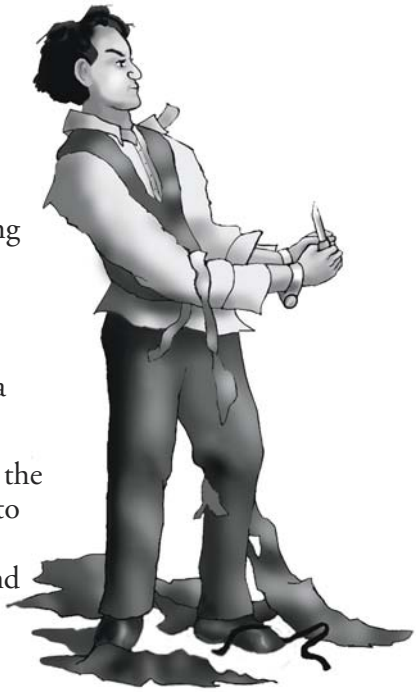
VOLUME THREE



HARRY HOUDINI

Lives of the Conjurers, Volume Three

- **HOUDINI** (Part I) The story of the escape artist who became the highest-paid performer in vaudeville. From his early days as a newsboy, to his years struggling in beer halls, sideshows, dime museums, and other lowly venues, to his success as the Handcuff King, to his rise to international fame. (His fateful encounter with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and spiritualism, and subsequent campaign against fraudulent mediums, will be the subject of Part II.)
- **LARRY WEEKS** A master juggler, he dwelt amidst a chaotic collection of magic memorabilia—including the sole surviving copy of *The Grim Game,* Houdini's lost film.
- **MARTIN SUNSHINE** Every summer for 35 years, he donned a fez and performed at a resort as Kismet the Magician.
- **LUNG TUNG** Once the Court Magician to the Empress of China, he had been reduced to passing the hat in hotel lobbies. But he could still hear the sounds of the court and the reverberations of the gong.



Professor Solomon is a magician and author. His books include *How to Find Lost Objects, Japan in a Nutshell,* and *Coney Island.* They are available at www.professorsolomon.com.

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Lives of the Conjurers

Volume Three

by Professor Solomon

Illustrated by Steve Solomon

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Houdini

Cablegram

On July 8, 1913, at a pier in Hoboken, Harry Houdini and his wife Bess were boarding a steamship. A few months earlier they had returned to the U.S.: the celebrated magician had wanted to spend time with his mother. (He had also signed on for two weeks of shows at Hammerstein's Roof Garden.) But now they were headed back to Europe, for another round of touring.

Among those seeing them off was Houdini's mother, Cecelia Weiss—a stout, pale woman who spoke little English, and who did not look happy. "*Ehrich, vielleicht wenn du zurück kommst bin ich nicht hier*" ("Ehrich, perhaps when you come home I won't be here"), she had said to him. All of the passengers had boarded except Houdini. He kept climbing the gangplank, then rejoining his mother on the pier for one last embrace. At last he boarded; the gangplank was drawn up; and the ship began to move. From the deck Harry and Bess waved and threw paper streamers.

Eight days later the ship docked in Hamburg. The Houdinis took an overnight train to Copenhagen. And the following night he performed beneath the dome of the Cirkus Beketow. The audience, which included members of the Danish royal family, had crowded into the arena. They had come to see the escape artist billed as "the Modern Prometheus." And Houdini, the consummate showman, did not disappoint them.*

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* Prometheus and Houdini differ in this respect: the Titan, chained to a rock on Mount Caucasus, needs Hercules to free him; while Houdini, a modern man, frees himself—through strenuous effort, skill, and trickery.

The high point of the show was his escape from the Water Torture Cell. A narrow, glass-fronted tank was filled with water. His feet were shackled in wooden stocks; and Houdini was lowered headfirst into the tank. His hair undulated like seaweed, as the stocks—serving as a lid—were secured with padlocks. Immediately, curtains were placed around the tank, hiding it from view.

Houdini knew (and made sure others knew) the danger that was inherent in this escape:

> Imagine yourself jammed head foremost in a Cell filled with water, your hands and feet unable to move, and your shoulders tightly lodged in this imprisonment. I believe it is the climax of all my studies and labors. Never will I be able to construct anything that will be more dangerous or difficult for me to do.

The orchestra began to play. An assistant stood by with an ax. If necessary, he would smash the glass and release the water. As minutes went by, a nervous murmur arose from the audience.

Then Houdini, dripping wet and gasping for breath, burst from behind the curtains. Somehow he had escaped, from the tank, the stocks, the locks—and from drowning. Thunderous applause echoed from the dome.

The next day, in the lobby of the arena, he met with reporters. He expressed gratitude for the friendly reception he had received in Copenhagen, and discussed his plans. While chatting with the reporters, Houdini was handed a cablegram. He read it and fainted—fell unconscious to the floor.

Regaining consciousness, Houdini wept. He had learned, from his brother Dash, that their mother had died. "Mama," he moaned. "My dear little mother—poor little mama." The reporters quietly left.

Bess and the assistants helped him back to the hotel. Houdini was stunned, distraught, barely able to speak. But he was soon doing what needed to be done. He cabled

Dash, instructing him to delay the funeral. He cancelled his engagement at the Cirkus Beketow. And he booked passage to New York—on the same ship they had arrived on, soon to be making its return trip. He and Bess hastily packed.

They reached the U.S. on July 29th. The funeral was held the next day; and Cecelia Weiss was buried in the family plot. For a month Houdini paid daily visits to her grave, throwing himself on the ground and speaking to her. Otherwise, he rarely left the house. By day he re-read letters that his mother had written to him. At night he would awaken and cry out for her.

He was inconsolable. "I who have laughed at the terrors of death," he wrote to Dash, "who have smilingly leaped from high bridges, received a shock from which I do not think recovery is possible." He was "bowed down with grief," he told his brother.

Houdini became apathetic and lost interest in his career. The death of his mother had cast a dark and debilitating shadow on his spirits. "I can't seem to get over it," he lamented. "I try and scheme ahead as in the past, but I seem to have lost all ambition."

Early Years

It was ambition—along with fortitude, industry, perseverance, and other virtues urged upon the young—that had enabled the son of Hungarian immigrants to become the highest-paid performer in vaudeville. For the story of Ehrich Weiss—the future Harry Houdini—was not unlike that of a Horatio Alger novel. The main theme of those novels (*Ragged Dick, Tattered Tom, Phil the Fiddler, Luck and Pluck, Sink or Swim, Paul the Peddler,* and scores of others) was invariably one of rags-to-riches, or at least rags-to-respectability. Alger wrote for the edification of juveniles; and his protagonists were bootblacks, newsboys, errand boys, luggage boys, messenger boys, hustling urchins, homeless waifs—"disadvantaged" youths who, by dint of

virtuous behavior, rose from humble circumstances into the ranks of the middle class. And although Ehrich, unlike the standard Alger hero, had an intact and supportive family, he contributed to its finances with the same sort of lowly employment.

Ehrich Weiss spent part of his childhood in Appleton, the town in Wisconsin to which the family had immigrated when he was four. His father had been hired by the local Jewish community to serve as their rabbi. But after four years he was let go; and the family moved to Milwaukee. There, Rabbi Weiss occasionally assisted at a religious service. And for a while he ran a Hebrew school.*

But the rabbi was unable to provide for his family. Cecilia Weiss had to seek aid from the Hebrew Relief Society. Ehrich, along with his brothers, helped out. On the streets of Milwaukee he sold newspapers and shined shoes. Years later, reflecting on this period, he would write: "Such hard-

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* In the spring of 1912, Ehrich returned to Milwaukee—as Houdini—for an engagement at the Majestic Theatre. A reporter interviewed him in his dressing room:

"Harry Houdini, 'the handcuff king,' is a Milwaukee boy. With his father, Rabbi Mayer Samuel Weiss, he came to Milwaukee from Appleton about thirty years ago. His father, who had for many years been pastor of a Jewish synagogue in Appleton, was turned out, says Mr. Houdini, because he was too old, and he was left with no means of support for his wife and seven small children. Unable to support himself in pastoral work in Milwaukee, he turned his house at 712 Winnebago-st into a school, and put across the front of it such a huge sign that it was ordered down by the city authorities.

"'I am going down to that place before I leave,' said Mr. Houdini, 'to see if that sign isn't in the back yard somewhere. Father sunk nearly every cent he had in that sign.'...

"As the reporter rose, Mr. Houdini remarked: 'In a few days I am going with my wife and my mother to Appleton to see the old landmarks. I have my mother with me, too, and oh, but she is a mother!'" (Milwaukee *Journal*, May 1, 1912)

ship and hunger became our lot that the less said about it, the better." On his twelfth birthday Rabbi Weiss exacted a promise from Ehrich: that he would provide for his mother for the rest of her days.

Soon thereafter, Ehrich ran away from home. His mother received a postcard from him, signed "Your truant son." He was headed for Texas, he wrote, and would be home in a year. But the runaway seems to have settled for less. According to John F. Kasson, in *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man* (2001):

> In fact, it appears that he was gone only several months and spent most of this time about fifty miles from Milwaukee, in Delavan, Wisconsin. Working as a shoeshine boy and calling himself Ehrich White (his first tentative shedding of his Jewish name and racial identity in favor of a more generalized whiteness), he was taken in by a couple who thought him homeless. Houdini later offered various explanations for this escapade, perhaps reflecting the confusion he felt at the time: that he "ran away from home to earn some money" (and so was a dutiful son after all); that he sought to "seek my fortune" (like the younger son in a folktale); that he intended to "join a small circus" (under the spell of which he had already fallen and [in a boyhood performance as an acrobat] styled himself "Ehrich, the Prince of the Air"); and, more vaguely, that he "resolved to see the world."

At the time Delavan was known as the circus capital of the U.S.—more than twenty circuses made it their winter quarters; and that may have drawn Ehrich to the town. Conceivably, he had hoped to join a circus. A decade later, as Houdini, he would do so.

Upon returning to Milwaukee, he learned that another adventure awaited him. His father had decided to seek employment in New York, and wanted Ehrich to accompany him there.

New York

Initially, father and son stayed in a boarding house. Then they found an apartment on East Seventy-fifth Street and sent for the rest of the family. Cecilia Weiss soon arrived, with Ehrich's brothers and sister; and the family settled into their new home—three rooms in a tenement, amidst the noise and bustle and teeming streets of Manhattan. So different was this city from Milwaukee that it was as if they had immigrated anew.

Rabbi Weiss looked for work. He had a business card printed, advertising "all religious services a specialty"—weddings, funerals, circumcisions. And he offered Hebrew lessons. Yet once again he was unable to provide for his family—a responsibility that fell to Ehrich (who had ceased to attend school) and the other boys.

Ehrich was fourteen years old. Not shy about seeking employment, he found work as a photographer's assistant and as a messenger boy. In his messenger uniform, the former urchin looked almost respectable.

Finally, he went to work at H. Richter's Sons, a necktie factory on Broadway. His job was to cut linings for the neckties. As a workplace, Richter's was low-wage but relatively benign (few complaints were filed about conditions there); and he remained an employee for two-and-a-half years. At one point his father labored alongside him. The rabbi had found it necessary to moonlight as a cutter.*

It was around this time that Ehrich began a serious study of magic. He was already an amateur magician, calling himself Eric the Great and performing at social events. At Richter's he became friends with Jacob Hyman, a worker at a nearby bench, who had a similar interest in magic. Two

* The Richter building, located at 502 Broadway and notable for its cast-iron facade, is occupied today by a branch of Bloomingdales. Perhaps the ghost of Houdini has returned at night, looking for his old bench, only to be puzzled by the displays of merchandise.

years older than Ehrich, Jacob encouraged him and taught him tricks. Ehrich began to read books on conjuring. Among them were the memoirs of Robert-Houdin, the French magician who is considered the founder of modern magic. These memoirs had a profound effect on Ehrich. "From the moment I began to study the art, he became my guide and hero."

In 1891 Ehrich and Jacob quit their jobs at Richter's. Ehrich received a letter of recommendation, describing him as "an honest and industrious young man." But he had no immediate plans to make use of the letter. For the two of them had put together a magic act and hoped to make money with it. Vaudeville-style, they were calling themselves the Brothers Houdini.*

The duo began to make the rounds of agents, looking for work; and they occasionally found it. Their act featured Metamorphosis, an illusion they had purchased from a destitute magician. In Metamorphosis, one of them was handcuffed and imprisoned in a bag. The bag was placed inside a trunk; and the trunk was secured with chains and padlocks. Yet he was able to escape, suddenly appearing outside the trunk. And his partner was found inside the bag! The trick never failed to amaze.

Initially, the Brothers Houdini performed at beer halls—smoke-filled dives whose clientele was inebriated and raucous. The audiences were troublesome; and the beer halls did not pay well. Jacob eventually became dissatisfied and quit the act. He was replaced briefly by his brother, Joe. And Joe was replaced by Ehrich's younger brother, Dash.†

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* The name obviously derives from that of Robert-Houdin. But it also echoes that of Torrini, the magician whom Robert-Houdin credited as his mentor. For the truth about Torrini—a magician who, it turns out, never existed—see *Lives of the Conjurers, Volume One.*

† Jacob Hyman set out on his own as a magician, calling himself J. H. Houdini and billing himself as "Houdini, King of Wonder Workers." In 1903 he met with the attorney for his former partner,

The Brothers Houdini—actual brothers now—continued in their efforts to establish themselves as magicians. They took any gigs that were offered, whether in New York or out-of-town. Their earnings barely covered their expenses. Moreover, they were providing for their mother. (Rabbi Weiss had died; and Cecilia's sons were now her sole support.) Yet the Modern Monarchs of Mystery, as they billed themselves, persevered. In 1893 the Columbian Exposition opened in Chicago, and drew large crowds. Ehrich and Dash performed there for a month, in a tent on the Midway. But for the most part, they were finding work now at dime museums.

Dime Museums

Penny arcades, nickelodeons, dime novels—a century ago, these were popular and inexpensive forms of entertainment. And akin to them in both popularity and price was the dime museum—an institution that has been largely forgotten. Yet it played a significant role in the evolution of show business in America. For the dime museum served as a bridge—between the era of variety-theatres, beer halls, and concert saloons (venues that were less than respectable), and the rise of vaudeville.

Essayist Charles D. Stewart—who once performed in a dime museum, as The Man Who Talks Backward—describes that evolution:

> It is usually considered that the old variety-theater was the precursor of vaudeville; but this is a mistake. Nothing in

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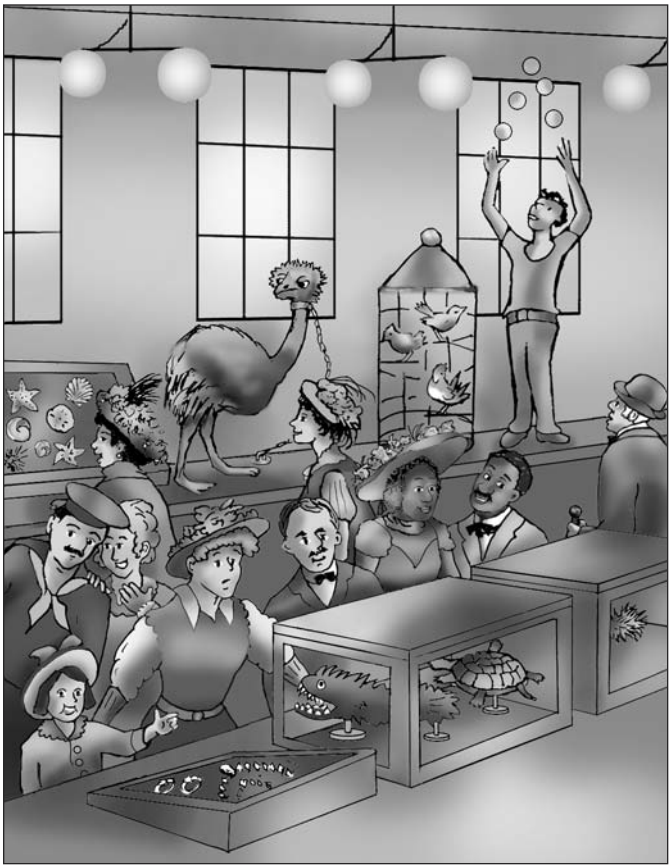
and agreed (probably for a hefty sum) to stop using the name. He left show business; attended medical school; and became a successful eye, ear, nose, and throat specialist, with a practice in Hollywood. Despite their legal wrangling, he and Harry Houdini remained friends.

Joe Hyman wound up in England, working as a comedian in music halls. And Dash later became "Hardeen," an imitation authorized by Houdini—a kind of second-unit of his show.

> the world could have popularized the variety-show at this time, reeking in the public mind with the fumes of bad cigars, the seat-to-seat peddling of beer, and the general understanding of "for men only." It was the dime museum, run on a plane of respectability, which paved the way and bridged the gap by making variety popular. The most important vaudeville circuits of to-day and the finest vaudeville theater in Chicago were founded by men who had made their money with the museums; it was their next step in the natural growth of things. (*The Century Magazine*, April 1917)*

The first dime museum was in New York; and its creator was P. T. Barnum. In 1841 he opened his American Museum of Curios, at the corner of Broadway and Ann Street. The outside of the building was festooned with flags and banners. Inside were five floors of attractions—displays of curiosities, oddities (human and otherwise), and natural wonders (both real and fake), along with performances by jugglers and other entertainers. There was also a lecture

* Stewart himself had helped to pave the way to vaudeville. His act was described in a Cincinnati newspaper: "'The mnemonic, orthographic, linguistic, phonetic wonder of the age,' as the press-agent expresses it, is Mr. Charles D. Stewart, the accomplished young gentleman who gives an entertainment on the Bijou stage at Kohl and Middleton's Dime Museum this week. He is a shining example of what assiduous practice and close study of the science of mnemonics will enable a person to accomplish. He is known as 'The Man Who Talks Backward.' He invites any one in the audience to call out a word. It matters not how long or technical or difficult of pronunciation the word may be. With the rapidity of lightning he spells and pronounces it backward and then writes its definition upon the blackboard. He spells whole sentences backward, showing his wonderful memory. So far no one has given him a word he could not instantly and correctly spell backward and define." (Cincinnati *Enquirer*, October 13, 1890)



room, which was later expanded into a theatre—for the production of plays that were morally instructive. For Barnum advertised his museum as a place of edification.

The American Museum was an immediate success. Thanks to Barnum's instincts as a showman, skills as a publicist, and shameless humbuggery (most famously, the Feejee Mermaid), thirty-eight million tickets would be sold during the lifetime of the museum—or so Barnum would claim.

In 1865 his museum burned to the ground. Undaunted, he opened a new one. Three years later, it too burned. He then moved on to a new career, as the proprietor of a traveling circus.

But the success of the American Museum had not gone unnoticed; and dime museums had begun to proliferate. Eventually, more than a hundred of them would open their doors to the public. Most were located in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, or Chicago. In New York, the Eden Musée, on Twenty-third Street, and Huber's Museum, on Fourteenth Street, were popular destinations; and the Bowery abounded with museums—Alexander's, Bunnell's, the Globe, the Gaiety, the Grand. A poster for the Grand describes it as "Museum, Menagerie & Moral Theatre." Listed as its main attraction is Mrs. General Tom Thumb (widow of the celebrity midget).

The dime museums drew visitors from all levels of society. And unlike the variety-theatres, beer halls, and concert saloons, they sought (with varying degrees of success) a veneer of respectability. Their displays and exhibitions were educational, they assured the public. And families were welcome. (The Anatomy Museums—low resorts on the Bowery that admitted only males—were an exception.)

Most of the museums were divided into two spaces: the curio hall and the theatre. Visitors could pause in their tour of the curio hall—an assemblage of curiosities, human prodigies, waxwork figures, live animals, and performers—and attend a play in the theatre. The plays were meant to be uplifting. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a common offering; *The Drunkard*, a temperance play, was another. Also presented here were variety acts, such as singers and acrobats. A screen was available for magic-lantern shows. And from 1897 to 1899, these theatres were the principal venue for motion pictures.

An afternoon at a dime museum was not complete without a visit to its theatre. But the audience then returned to the curio hall, with its "educational" displays and exhibitions. A trade newspaper described the current fare at a Harlem museum:

> The curio hall this week presents a moving diorama of the great Centennial parade. It is truly a wonderful exhibition

> of mechanical skill and ingenuity, and is the work of Edwin Deaves, father of Harry Deaves, the manager, who has spent considerable time in perfecting the work, which is now placed on exhibition for the first time. The other attractions are: The African dude, Ridder, Circassian tattooed man; two cowboy banjo and bone players, a sleight of hand man, a group of life size mechanical figures, the Hindoo Priest, English Jack, the frog man; Prof. Skinner's Punch and Judy, a fat man and a lady pianist. (*New York Clipper*, May 4, 1889)

And to conclude a visit to this cornucopia of curiosities, one could patronize the food and souvenir stands.

It was in dime museums that Harry Houdini—as Ehrich was now calling himself—honed his skills as a magician. After the Brothers Houdini concluded their stay at the Columbian Exposition, Harry performed solo at Kohl & Middleton's, a Chicago museum. He then returned to New York, where he and Dash were booked for one week at Huber's Museum.

Huber's was one of the most popular museums in the city. The sign over its entrance was an exercise in Barnumesque hyperbole:

> ADMISSION 10 CENTS. ONE MILLION NATURAL, HISTORICAL, ORIENTAL, NATIONAL, ANTIQUE CURIOSITIES, ONE MILLION

But no one among the visitors was counting. For a small fee they had been admitted to a fabulous place. Its curio hall seemed an endless array of curiosities in display cases and performers on platforms. And its theatre offered continuous shows; boasted "the latest improved opera chairs"; and was "splendidly ventilated."

Huber's called itself a Palace of Amusement. And it advertised itself as providing wholesome family entertainment. Alas, that entertainment included freaks—"living curiosities" who exhibited themselves in the curio hall. Most were genuine, some were not. These human anom-

alies were given lodgings on the top floor of the museum. Huber's was both their home and their workplace.

Who was paying that dime for admission? According to the *New York Times*, Huber's patrons formed "the most heterogeneous gathering to be found anywhere in New York. People from out of town, east side folks, women and children, young men of the Bowery stamp, sailors on shore leave—all of them mingled in the crowds that went to Huber's....Huber's entertainments were always clean, if they did lack what fastidious people might call refinement."

During their week at Huber's, the Brothers Houdini performed in its curio hall. Their act featured Metamorphosis; and a dozen times daily, they magically exchanged places. Pleased with the act was J. H. Anderson, the manager of Huber's. Anderson was known to be sympathetic to magicians. It was he who had hired the brothers and given them this boost to their careers.

Eighteen months later, Anderson would bring the act back to Huber's. Once again, Harry Houdini—confined to both the bag and the trunk—would magically exchange places with his partner.

But that partner would be someone new.*

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* Huber's Museum (which closed in 1910) is not to be confused with Hubert's Dime Museum and Flea Circus. (The similarity in names was probably intentional.) Located in a basement on Forty-second Street, Hubert's opened in 1924 and closed in 1965. It was the last of the dime museums. Its proprietor was Professor Heckler, whose flea circus was the main attraction. Among those who graced the stage at Hubert's were a tattooed lady, a magician, and a giant.

For several years after its closing, the remains of Hubert's could be visited. Curious, I paid a visit. The entrance was at the rear of a penny arcade called Playland. Inside an antique ticket booth sat a woman who took my money—a mere quarter. I descended a narrow stairway and found myself in Hubert's curio hall. The silence was eerie in this dimly-lit cavern. Only a handful of

Bess

The *Coney Island Clipper*, a weekly newspaper for the island, reported in its July 28, 1894 issue:

> The brothers Houdini, who for years have mystified the world by their mysterious box mystery, known as "Metamorphosis," are no more and the team will hereafter be known as the Houdinis. The new partner is Miss Bess Raymond, the petite soubrette, who was married to Mr. Harry Houdini on July 22 by Rev. G. S. Loui of Brooklyn. Harry has bought his brother's interest in the act, and he and Miss Bess Raymond will hereafter perform it.

In the year since their return to New York and that week at Huber's, the Brothers Houdini had been working at dime museums—Worth's, Old Moore's, the Harlem Museum—beer halls, and any place else that would hire them. At Worth's they had been held over for three weeks, so mystifying was Metamorphosis. The Fourth of July found them at Miner's on the Bowery. And from there they went out to Coney Island, for gigs at Vacca's Casino and the Sea Beach Palace.

Performing at the Sea Beach Palace that summer were the three Floral Sisters, a song-and-dance act. One of the sisters (though not actually a sibling) was Bess Raymond, as Wilhelmina Beatrice Rahner was calling herself. Bess was eighteen, two years younger than Harry. She was petite—less than five feet tall and about ninety pounds. And she was a soubrette—a lively, light-hearted soprano.

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exhibits remained: stuffed animals; mounted butterflies; alleged relics of the reclusive Collyer Brothers. A hallway leading to the stage was closed off. I was alone except for a man asleep on a pool table.

The next time I was in New York, I returned for a second visit. But Playland was gone—replaced by a peepshow arcade; and gone too was Hubert's.

There are differing accounts of the first meeting of Harry and Bess. In one version, the Brothers Houdini and two of the Floral Sisters went out on a double date—a stroll together, perhaps, along the walkways of the seaside resort. In another, Dash dated Bess and then introduced her to his brother. In any case, Harry was immediately drawn to her. The magnetism was mutual; and two weeks later they were married.

Bess became his partner in the magic act as well. At the Sea Beach Palace, the brothers gave their final performance together; and that night Harry asked Bess and Dash to take a walk with him. He led them to a bridge that spanned Coney Island Creek—the narrow waterway that divided the island from the mainland. In *Houdini: His Life-Story* (1928), Bess (who collaborated in the writing with journalist Harold Kellock) tells what happened next:

> It was a weird-looking night, with a split moon that seemed to be dodging in and out behind heavy clouds. In the middle of the bridge he halted us, and there we waited for a time silently, I at least in growing trepidation.
>
> Finally a distant bell tolled solemnly twelve times. As soon as the last beat ceased to reverberate, Houdini clasped his brother's hand and mine together, raised them aloft and cried: "Beatrice, Dash, raise your hands to heaven and swear you will both be true to me. Never betray me in any way, so help you God."

They repeated the vow after him. Harry then kissed Bess, shook Dash's hand, and said: "I know you will keep that sacred oath."

Thus began the new partnership—the theatrical career of Harry and Bess Houdini.

The Houdinis

In "Bess: The Magician's Assistant, the Magician's Wife," Hasia R. Diner describes their first years together:

> Bess and Harry embarked on their peripatetic [itinerant] early career, enduring years of privation, drifting from one marginal entertainment venue to another, including beer halls, dime museums, circuses, medicine shows, vaudeville houses, dance halls, storefronts transformed into temporary entertainment spaces, even street corners. They went across the country, presenting themselves to audiences in big cities and remote hinterland towns. They slept in makeshift tents and decrepit rooms, hungry at times, often down to their last penny. They took whatever jobs they could get, performing any kind of act, publicized through newspaper advertisements and handbills, that brought in some wages. Augmenting the magic tricks and illusions in which Harry specialized and with which she assisted, Bess branched out on her own, singing, dancing, doing card tricks, and clowning. (*Houdini: Art and Magic*, Brooke Kamin Rapaport et al., 2010)

The centerpiece of the act was still Metamorphosis, advertised as "the greatest trunk mystery the world has ever seen." Harry wore ill-fitting evening clothes; Bess, a loose top and tights (dress that was deemed provocative). Harry would climb into the bag, with his wrists tied behind his back. The bag was tied shut, sealed, and enclosed in the trunk. The trunk was secured with six padlocks and a strap. The trunk was then concealed behind a curtain. Bess ducked behind the curtain; seconds later, Harry drew it aside and stepped out. He unlocked the trunk, opened it, untied the bag. And inside the bag, her wrists tied behind her, was Bess. Audiences were amazed.

From the start their goal was to graduate into the "big-time"—the major vaudeville houses. And in January of 1895, it seemed to have finally happened. Harry and Bess were performing at a small theatre in Virginia, when they received a telegram from their agent. He had booked them for a week at Tony Pastor's Fourteenth Street Theatre. They rejoiced at the news; for here was the break they had been waiting for. Tony Pastor was the originator of vaudeville;

and his theatre was one of its leading venues.

But the Houdinis were to be disappointed. They borrowed train fare and returned to New York. Arriving at the theatre, they found themselves billed as the opening act—the least desirable spot in vaudeville. For people were still entering the theatre, finding seats, talking.

Still, they were glad to be performing—three shows per day—on the stage of a major theatre. But at the end of the week they were let go, with no mention of a return engagement. Pastor did provide them with a note: "The Houdinis act as performed I found satisfactory and interesting." But so tepid an endorsement would get them nowhere. Harry and Bess went back to taking any work that came along. The big-time had come and gone.

What came along in February were two weeks on a plat-

form at Huber's. And in the spring, the Houdinis signed on for six months with a circus. Years later, Harry would recall:

> In 1895 I was engaged by the Welsh Brothers' Circus, a circus which travelled almost exclusively through the State of Pennsylvania, and for the services of Mrs. Houdini and myself I received the sum of £4 weekly, railroad fares and board.
>
> The amount was small, but I still look back with pleasure upon that season's work as being one in which we had an abundance of clothes to wear and good food to eat, for the Welsh Brothers certainly fed their artists extra well.
>
> For this £4 weekly Mrs. Houdini and myself first of all had to give a free performance in front of the side show to attract the crowds. Inside, I then lectured upon the curiosities, gave a magic show, worked the Punch and Judy show, and with the assistance of Mrs. Houdini finally presented a second sight [mindreading] act. In the main concert Mrs. Houdini acted as the singing clown, while later on we presented our specialty, which consisted of the trunk trick....
>
> I offered my handcuff act to the Welsh Brothers for £1 extra per week, and it was rejected. (*The Magician Annual* 1909–10)*

The circus had its winter quarters on the outskirts of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The newly-hired Houdinis arrived at the encampment, recalls Bess, "in a night of drenching rain with a howling gale." They were escorted to a freight car on a railroad siding. The Welsh Brothers Circus traveled in two freight cars. One had been converted into living quarters for members of the company. It was divided by

* On occasion, he would also don a burlap sack, paint his face with purple stripes, and serve as the Wild Man of Mexico. Crouched in a cage, he growled at visitors to the side show. They were encouraged to toss him cigars, which Harry ate—or rather, pretended to eat. Actually, he used sleight of hand to conceal the cigars, distributing them later to his fellow artists.

wood panels into narrow compartments, each furnished with a cot. A curtain provided privacy. Bess had grown up in a large family, housed in a small apartment in Brooklyn; but these were close quarters indeed. And the residents were an unholy assortment of circus folk. She describes her initial reaction:

> We were then taken down a narrow passageway to our bunk. On the way Mr. Welsh shouted: "Here are the Houdinis!" and a chorus of voices came from various points in the darkness crying, "Welcome to our city," and similar greetings....Still soaking wet, dismayed at the strange environment, the darkness, the cramped quarters, I fell on the cot sobbing. Houdini soothed me. He was already engaged in thinking out little rimes for my songs, and acted so thoroughly at home that I was shamed out of some of my terror.

No less communal, they soon discovered, were the dining arrangements. In each town visited by the Welsh Brothers Circus, the canvas men raised the main tent, along with a "cook tent" for meals. At makeshift tables the company ate together—meals that Harry would remember as the best he ever ate. At one table sat the canvas men—"the grimmest, most unshaven men I had ever seen," reports Bess; at another table, the performers.

The Welsh Brothers Circus was a popular attraction in the towns it visited. Describing it as "strictly a first class show at a small admission price," a review listed some of its attractions:

> The performances were decidedly interesting and amusing, among the principal acts being the Houdini in their mystical act "Metamorphosis," the school of educated dogs, the funny frogmen Whitlark and Kaminsky, juggling, trapeze performances and the excellent music furnished by the band and orchestra.

During their six months with the circus, Harry sent half

of their wages to his mother; the other half he saved. When the season ended, he used the money to acquire part-interest in the American Gaiety Girls, a burlesque troupe. It featured buxom chorus girls, who danced in shirtwaists and bloomers; an exhibition by May Morgan, the "Champion Lady Wrestler," who took on all comers; a pair of comedians (or "bananas," as they were called); and farcical skits. Metamorphosis was added to the show. And Bess entertained with comic songs.

The American Gaiety Girls toured the Northeast. In March 1896 the troupe played the Palace theatre in Boston. A critic in attendance there praised "the sensational illusion, or box trick, performed by the Houdinis. The act created a furor and mystified all present."

But a month later, Harry's business venture came to an abrupt end. In Woonsocket, Rhode Island, the company's manager (husband of the lady wrestler) was arrested for

misappropriating funds; and the American Gaiety Girls, heavily in debt, folded.

Once again the Houdinis were broke and looking for work.

Marco

Edward J. Dooley, a Canadian immigrant, lived in a boarding house in Hartford, Connecticut. He earned a living as the organist at St. Patrick's Church, the conductor at the Hartford Opera House, and a music teacher. But Dooley was also an amateur magician. Herrmann the Great, Harry Kellar, and other magicians had performed at the Opera House. As he led the orchestra and watched from the pit, Dooley had dreamt of mounting a similar show of his own—of exchanging his baton for a wand, coming on stage before an expectant audience, and astonishing it with his mastery of magic.

Finally, at the age of forty-two, he decided to fulfill this ambition. With his savings he purchased the necessary paraphernalia for a full evening show. He secured bookings in Nova Scotia (his home province) and New Brunswick. The bookings were for Marco the Magician, as he was calling himself. And he assembled a small company of stagehands and assistants. The assistants—whose own act would be included in the show—were Harry and Bess. The American Gaiety Girls had played a theatre in Hartford; and he may have met the Houdinis then.

On May 26, 1896, the Marco Magic Company set sail from Boston, bound for Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. It was Harry's first time aboard a ship; and he discovered that he was prone to seasickness. Yet despite his misery during the passage, he remained excited. For the first time, he and Bess would be participating in a full evening show.

In Yarmouth the company checked into a hotel. Marco the Magician ran ads in the town's newspapers. And he issued a press release. The "wonderful Marco," it asserted, had performed at the Egyptian Hall in London. And in

Hartford, it claimed, a critic had bestowed upon the show this praise: "'Not the least entertaining feature of his work was the bright and witty remarks that accompanied every trick.'" Neither of these claims, of course, was factual. A magician's press release was another of his deceptions.

After several days of rehearsals the show opened at the Marine Hall. Marco performed half-an-hour of sleight-of-hand tricks, with cards and coins. Then he introduced Harry and Bess, identifying her as his daughter Mademoiselle Marco; and the Houdinis performed Metamorphosis. There followed a series of illusions, including the Cabinet of Phantoms, Trilby (Marco levitated Bess), and the Growth of the Mango Tree. Bess—as Mademoiselle Marco the Clairvoyant—read minds. And Harry did a handcuff escape.

They performed in Yarmouth for two nights, to full houses. A review described Metamorphosis as "worth the price of admission." And morale was high, as the company packed up its props, boarded a train, and continued its tour of the Maritime Provinces. The next stop was Saint John, the largest town in New Brunswick.

In Saint John they set up at the Opera House, for a week-long engagement. A press release was issued ("In England and America," it declared, "these illusions have been marveled at and have puzzled the most knowing minds"); and ads were placed. But the Marco Magic Company had competition in Saint John: the popular Walter L. Main Circus was making its annual visit. The circus (which traveled with its own lithographer) had plastered the town with posters. In addition, a national election was approaching; and many of the townsfolk would be attending political rallies.

As a consequence, less than two hundred of the Opera House's twelve hundred seats were filled on opening night; on the second night, even fewer; on the third night, fewer still—a box-office disaster that continued throughout the week. Disastrous too was the Growth of the Mango Tree illusion. On opening night the tree had failed to function.

After Saint John, Marco was scheduled to perform in nearby Fredericton and Moncton. But he had to cancel those bookings, on account of a low number of advance ticket sales. Nonetheless, he remained hopeful. The next stop would be Halifax, for a week at its Academy of Music. Halifax was the capital of Nova Scotia and his home town. Surely a sizeable turnout could be expected.

But the performances at the Academy of Music had been pushed back one week, to accommodate a burlesque show from London. The change of dates put Marco in direct competition with the Nautical Fair, a weeklong festival that drew large crowds, and with the celebrations for Dominion Day, Canada's national holiday. Moreover, Herrmann the Great—the leading magician of the day—was coming soon to the Academy of Music. These competing events served to eclipse Marco. On opening night, he would find himself looking out from the stage at mostly empty seats.

For a magician, bold publicity was the key to attracting an audience. From the start of their tour, Harry had sought to draw attention to the Marco show with publicity stunts. In Yarmouth, at the general store where advance tickets were being sold, he had escaped from handcuffs—including a pair supplied by a policeman. Onlookers, among them a reporter, were impressed. In Saint John, at the police station, he had escaped from both standard handcuffs and a restraint called the Maniac Cuff. Several reporters were present; and the feats were publicized. And in Halifax, at the police station, he introduced a new stunt. First he escaped from several types of handcuffs, including an antique pair of navy manacles. Then he offered to strip down to a bathing suit—to show that no jail-breaking tools were concealed on his person—and escape from a jail cell. Confident that he would fail, and relishing the prospect, the police accepted the challenge. Harry stripped down. They locked him in a basement cell; promised to return to see how he was doing; and went about their business.

Soon thereafter, they received a phone call from the hotel down the street. Harry Houdini was there, they were told,

and was asking that his clothing be sent over to him. Not only had he escaped from the cell, but he had slipped out of the police station unnoticed.

The stunt was gleefully reported in the Halifax newspapers. But the publicity had little effect on attendance. On the first two nights, most of the seats at the Academy of Music were empty. And on the third night, a surprise was in store for those few in the audience—as Marco's career came to an abrupt end. No sooner had the curtain risen and Marco begun his opening routine, than the local sheriff hopped onto the stage. He halted the show and announced that its assets—the Cabinet of Phantoms, the Mango Tree, and the rest of its props—were being seized, in behalf of creditors. Plagued by a dearth of ticket sales, Marco had run out of money and hadn't been paying his bills.

Three days after losing his show, he sailed back to the

U.S. His career as a magician had lasted just over a month. Fortunately, he would be able to resume his musical employment in Hartford. Once again he would be Edward J. Dooley: organist at St. Patrick's, conductor at the Opera House, music teacher. And that month as Marco the Magician—as a conjurer with a full evening show—would begin to seem like a dream.

The majority of the company sailed with him. But the Houdinis, and one of the stagehands, stayed in Nova Scotia. Two bookings remained; and it had been arranged that Harry would fulfill them in Marco's place. Also, he had plans of his own.

For six weeks the three of them traveled about by train. First they honored those bookings, in Dartmouth and

Truro, with a reduced version of the show. Then more bookings were secured, for "the mysterious Harry Houdini," as he was billing himself. They also worked "blue sky"—showing up in a town, with no advance publicity; renting a hall; distributing handbills, selling tickets, and giving a show. Their show consisted of Metamorphosis (the trunk, belonging to Harry, had not been seized), card tricks, mindreading, an escape from handcuffs, and a levitation (apparently, the sheriff had overlooked the Trilby apparatus).

But financially, they fared no better than Marco. The money from ticket sales went to pay for halls, hotel rooms, meals, and train fare. And by the end of the summer, Harry and Bess were back in Yarmouth—nearly broke, exhausted, and ready to go home.

A ship was preparing to sail to Boston; but they didn't have enough money for the fare. Bess approached the captain, tearfully explained their situation, and proposed a deal. In exchange for passage, the Houdinis would entertain the passengers with a magic show. Amused by the idea, and sympathetic to their plight, the captain waved them aboard.

They set up on tables in the lounge. The ship set sail; and passengers gathered to watch the show. But Harry had become seasick. He had turned pale and begun to shake; and finally, he lurched out of the lounge. Bess attempted to do the show alone, but quickly gave up. The passengers were disappointed. But the Houdinis' financial situation had become known; and a collection was taken up in their behalf.

A brief notice appeared in the *New York Clipper*, the theatrical paper, for September 5, 1896: "Harry and Bess Houdini have just returned from a trip through the Canadian provinces and are now at their home." No further details were given. But the trip would prove to be a milestone in Harry's career. For he had traveled, during those final weeks, with a full show of his own. Moreover, the Marco tour marked the beginnings of what would become

his specialty. He had discovered the publicity value of escapes from handcuffs and jail cells. Bruce MacNab, author of *The Metamorphosis: The Apprenticeship of Harry Houdini*, sees this discovery as a turning point—a personal metamorphosis. "Houdini landed in Canada as a magician," he writes, "but left as an escape artist."*

Medicine Shows

Hundreds of wagons once roamed the back roads of America, bringing to small towns a unique combination of entertainment and miracle elixirs. In need of both, the townsfolk welcomed these wagons. Yet not everyone was pleased by their arrival. The town's physician (who deplored the competition) denied the efficacy of the elixirs; while the sheriff viewed those who peddled them as dubious characters. Both were critical of the traveling exhibition that had trundled into town: a medicine show.

The standard wagon was a kind of carnival booth on wheels, drawn by a team of horses. Inscribed on its sides was the name of the medicine man, as he was known. Invariably, he bore the title of "Doctor" or "Doc," though his medical training was non-existent. Rather, he was a showman, a purveyor of patent medicines, and a persuasive pitchman. Flamboyantly dressed, he drove the wagon himself. Aboard was his troupe of entertainers.

Arriving in a town, he parked the wagon at a central location. Depending on the size of the town—and the forbearance of the sheriff—he and his troupe would remain for a day, several days, or a week. Setting up a platform at the rear of the wagon, they ballyhooed a free show. And when a crowd had gathered, the show began. It included a variety

* Meticulously researched, *The Metamorphosis* was my source for information on this chapter in Houdini's career. Prior to its publication in 2012, little was known about the summer that he and Bess spent in the Maritime Provinces, or about Marco the Magician.

of acts. There might be a singer, a banjo player, a magician, a blackface comedian. The medicine man served as master of ceremonies, as these artists performed for an appreciative audience.

But periodically he interrupted them, with a sales pitch. Holding up a bottle of his elixir, he enumerated the ailments it would alleviate—virtually any ailment! He proclaimed its potency, in language ringing with hyperbole. And he praised its secret formula of herbs, roots, and barks—a formula revealed to him, he said, by an Indian healer.

Then he announced the price: just one dollar. And he urged the spectators to do themselves a favor and purchase a bottle. The performers now circulated, taking dollars from eager customers in exchange for a bottle of the elixir. The medicine man was a master orator; and his pitch had been persuasive.

Whence the dark liquid in the bottles? Some medicine men produced their own elixir, using common ingredients (including a healthy dose of alcohol). They mixed these in a kettle aboard the wagon or in a bathtub at their hotel. Others purchased their supply from a manufacturer of patent medicines. And still others were agents of the two largest manufacturers: the Hamlin's Wizard Oil Company and the Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company.

Hamlin's Wizard Oil was the creation of John Hamlin, a magician. During his act he had offered for sale a liniment, which he called Wizard Oil. Applying it to one's hands, he claimed, would facilitate the performance of sleight-of-hand tricks. Purchasers were probably disappointed. But when one of them reported that the liniment had cured his rheumatism, Hamlin sensed a business opportunity. In 1861 he and his brother started a patent medicine company. They manufactured Wizard Oil (along with other remedies), advertising it as a general pain reliever. "Hamlin's Wizard Oil is no humbug," the brothers assured the public, "but a really useful article. Try it, and its wonderful effects will astonish."

To market their liniment, the Hamlins dispatched a fleet of wagons westward from Chicago. Each wagon was pulled by four horses; bore advertising on its sides; and had a built-in stage at the rear. Aboard were a medicine man and a musical quartet. All were dressed in top hats, frock coats, vests, and striped trousers. In town after town the quartet would sing, attracting an audience. And the medicine man would give his pitch for Wizard Oil. The liniment was advertised as "the great medical wonder." And though it was in fact a humbug (despite those assurances), the product seemed to sell itself; and the fleet grew to some thirty wagons.

A rival fleet was that of the Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company. Founded by Doc Healy and Texas Charlie Bigelow, Kickapoo was headquartered in Connecticut. It produced a variety of elixirs, salves, and pills—most of which were of doubtful efficacy. But Kickapoo had a marketing plan similar to (and probably inspired by) that of the Hamlins. Doc Healy and Texas Charlie hired agents and entertainers; organized them into troupes; and sent them out into rural areas. Both small and large troupes were formed. The small ones traveled by wagon and performed outdoors. They consisted of the agent—the medicine man—and a half-dozen vaudevillians and Indians. (The Indians beat on drums and performed ceremonial dances.) The large troupes traveled by train and performed in tents. By 1888, Kickapoo had nearly a hundred units (or "Kicks," as they were known in the trade) roaming about the country. Some even traveled in Europe—successors to the mountebanks who, centuries earlier, had both peddled nostrums and entertained.

A Kickapoo troupe arrived in a town and stayed for a week, selling remedies to the public and wholesaling them to drugstores. Their best-seller was an elixir called Sagwa. It was advertised as the Indian secret to good health:

> The Indians have used it successfully for centuries. Their continual perfect health and longevity...is due to the fact

> that from their birth they have used Kickapoo Indian Sagwa. If you are not feeling just right, and cannot locate the trouble, take this wonderful medicine before it is too late. You do not know what minute you may be overtaken by some dire calamity. Health attends its use always. All druggists sell it. $1 a bottle; six bottles for $5.00.

The label on the bottle showed an Indian in a feathered headdress. If he was a Kickapoo (an actual tribe), he would have been surprised to hear about Sagwa and its benefits. For the Kickapoo remedies were purely an invention of Doc Healy and Texas Charlie. And they were no more effective than Wizard Oil. If one felt better after taking Sagwa, it was probably due to the alcohol content.

Medicine wagons were a common sight in rural areas. But they began to disappear. A major blow was dealt by the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, which regulated the contents and health claims of patent medicines. Also, consumers were becoming more sophisticated. And available to them were new forms of entertainment—vaudeville, movies, radio—that were more compelling than a medicine show. Thus, by the 1940s, only a few such shows—motorized now—remained in existence.

Today the medicine shows are extinct. Or are they? Free entertainment, interrupted periodically by pitches—does it not sound familiar? For commercial television is the legacy of the medicine show. The pitchmen who hawked their wares have been replaced by advertising agencies. The outdoor platform has given way to a television screen. And the audiences, while more sophisticated, are no less susceptible to persuasion.

The California Concert Company

In December 1897 the Houdinis received an offer to join the California Concert Company, a medicine show. The engagement was for fifteen weeks, and promised both a steady income and the communal satisfactions of member-

ship in a troupe. They accepted the offer and set out to rendezvous with the company.

The prospect of a steady income was welcome; for the previous year had been one of privation and discouragement. Harry and Bess had returned to New York, to recuperate from the rigors of the Canadian tour. Cecilia Weiss was glad to have them back in the family home on East Sixty-ninth Street. But they were soon traveling again, sleeping on trains or in cheap hotels. They were performing at dime museums and small-time vaudeville houses: the Imperial Music Hall in Buffalo; the Gregory Dime Museum in Milwaukee (where the manager cheated them out of their pay); Kohl & Middleton's in Chicago. They wound up in St. Louis, without work and nearly broke. Desperate, Harry (applying his sleight-of-hand skill) stole some potatoes from a vegetable stand. Locating a discarded crate, he broke it up for firewood to cook the potatoes.

Then came the offer, via an agent, to join the California Concert Company. Medicine shows were the lowest rung of show business (and of medicine). But fifteen weeks of employment was a windfall. They borrowed money for train fare; hauled their trunks to the station; and headed for Garnett, Kansas, the current location of the company.

The California Concert Company was the joint enterprise of two medicine men, Dr. Hill and Dr. Pratt. Dr. Hill was from San Francisco and in his early twenties. He had shoulder-length hair (a coiffure popular with medicine men) and a full beard—a prophet hawking an elixir! His partner Dr. Pratt was from Denver. In *Houdini: His Life-Story*, Bess describes Pratt as "a white-haired old gentleman with the air of a retired clergyman." He was both a medicine man and a musician: during the show Pratt played rousing music on a portable organ called the melodeon. He was apparently an old-time pitchman and a mentor to his younger colleague.

This medical duo traveled in a horse-drawn wagon, accompanied by the entertainers whom they had hired. The wagon resembled a Gypsy caravan. Inscribed on its sides

was the name of the company. Built into the rear of the wagon was a stage. And crammed into the wagon, as it traveled from town to town, were the performers. These included Dr. Hill's wife, a dancer; La Petite Alleene, a young girl who sang and danced; and Joe and Myra Keaton, a comedy team. With the Keatons was their two-year-old son. Harry would claim to have given Buster Keaton his nickname, after the boy took a tumble—a "buster"—down a stairway.

The Houdinis arrived in Kansas and immediately became part of the show, with their mind-reading act and handcuff escape. In each town that it visited, the company first ballyhooed the show from the rear of the wagon. To gather a crowd, Dr. Pratt played the melodeon; Harry rattled a tambourine; Bess sang. And Dr. Hill gave his pitch, as Harry circulated among the spectators, selling the elixir.

Then, that evening in a rented hall, the California Concert Company presented their show. It included a short melodrama titled "Ten Nights in a Bar Room," with Harry as the villain. There was a small charge for admission. But the real money came from sales of the elixir. At intervals during the show, Dr. Hill repeated his pitch; and the performers came down the aisle with bottles of the elixir.

The Houdinis' magic act became the mainstay of the show. And during a weeklong stay in Galena, Kansas, Dr. Hill approached them with an idea. Could they conduct a séance on stage—pretend to communicate with spirits of the dead? The turn-out in Galena had been disappointing; and a spiritualistic exhibition might draw in the "natives" (as medicine men referred to the inhabitants of rural areas).

Harry considered the proposal. He was familiar with the practices of fraudulent mediums, having read *Revelations of a Spirit Medium* (1891), an insider's account of the secrets of the trade. And at seventeen he had visited the dimly-lit parlor (in a brownstone on Forty-sixth Street that she had bilked from a client) of Minnie Williams. An enormous black woman, Mrs. Williams had seated herself in a cabinet; gone into a trance; and conjured up spirits—shrouded souls who manifest themselves in her parlor. It had not


Elixir of Life

escaped Harry's notice that the floorboards creaked beneath the feet of these disembodied figures.

If he had any scruples about engaging in a spiritualistic deception, Harry put them aside and agreed to do a séance. Bess recalls their initial venture into mediumship:

> On Sunday night the local Opera House was jammed. The messages and demonstrations given by Houdini caused the greatest astonishment and awe and were doubtless discussed in that town for many a long day. "How could he know all those things about us unless the spirits told him?" was the question everyone asked.
>
> The secret of that sensational séance was simple. That Sunday morning Houdini had paid a quiet visit to the village cemetery, accompanied by the village sexton and one Uncle Rufus, the town's most venerable gossip. Both these worthies were "fixed" not to give Houdini away. While Houdini copied the names, dates, and legends from the gravestones, Uncle Rufus and the sexton pumped him full of the intimate personal histories of those who lay beneath.

The séance became part of their repertoire, and was included periodically in the show. On a darkened stage Bess simulated a trance; Harry urged her to contact the spirit world; and in a dramatic fashion, she pretended to do so. Or they might reverse the roles. It was a new and compelling act—and one that had crossed the line into fraud.

But in February the California Concert Company disbanded; and once again the Houdinis were unemployed and far from home. Undaunted, they set out on a tour of their own—as mediums. Traveling from hall to hall in the Midwest, they conducted séances. Their handbill promised an evening of mysterious phenomena:

Grand, Brilliant, Bewildering and Startling
Spiritualistic Seance given by
Prof. Harry Houdini
The Great Mystifier
Assisted by Mlle. Beatrice Houdini
The Celebrated Psycrometic Clairvoyant

> Spiritual forms materialized, tables and musical instruments float in midair when conditions are favorable; messages received from dead and departed friends.

Their new act brought in audiences and astonished the credulous. But after several weeks, they decided to give it up. Their messages from the departed were providing false consolation to the bereaved; and Harry had begun to feel uneasy about perpetrating so grave a deception.

Bess describes the séances as "a temporary expedient in the difficult business of making a living." And she points out that Harry's experience as a fraudulent medium led to his campaign against such fraud:

> It was not a chapter he cared to look back on, but in a sense it served its purpose by giving him an inside glimpse of the workings of a pious fraud. In later years he made a sort of compensation when he took it on himself to expose the whole wretched business....His early moral revulsion from the mediumistic trickery contributed to the fervor of his later crusade.

In *A Magician Among the Spirits* (1924), Harry confesses to having "associated myself with mediums, joining the rank and file." But he came to realize the iniquity of their trade:

> As I advanced to riper years of experience I was brought to a realization of the seriousness of trifling with the hallowed reverence which the average human being bestows on the departed, and when I personally became afflicted with similar grief [the death of his mother] I was chagrined that I should ever have been guilty of such frivolity and for the first time realized that it bordered on crime.

School of Magic

In the months that followed their tour as mediums, the Houdinis assumed a number of other guises. Harry appeared on stage as Cardo the magician, and as Professor Murat the

hypnotist. He and Bess performed as a comedy duo called the Rahners; and they acted in melodramas with a stock company. Finally, they rejoined the Welsh Brothers Circus for a season.

But Harry was becoming discouraged. Despite his talent and ambition, he had failed to rise into big-time vaudeville. Instead, he was still performing at dime museums and beer halls, and living precariously from gig to gig. And he began to consider quitting the stage. Years later he would recall:

> In 1898 things became so bad that I contemplated quitting the show business, and retire to private life, meaning to work by day at one of my trades (being really proficient in several) and open a school of magic, which...would occupy my evenings.

That year he did in fact open a school. "Harry Houdini's School of Magic," as he called it, was located in the Weiss home on Sixty-ninth Street. Initially, however, no classes or lessons were offered on the premises. Instead, the curriculum consisted solely of an illustrated catalog—a listing of conjuring supplies that were available by mail order.

The catalog had sixteen pages (later expanded to thirty-two), and was titled *Magic Made Easy*. On the cover was a picture of Professor Harry Houdini—"King of Cards and Handcuffs"—in formal dress. Advertised inside were dozens of tricks and illusions, including those of Augustus Roterberg, a leading manufacturer of apparatus. Harry was acting as his agent. Books on magic were available. And for sale were secrets—detailed instructions for effects such as the Hindoo Needle Trick. "I am the only one who sells it. Can't be had anywhere else. Was taught to me by Hindoos at World's Fair in 1893."

Among the secrets offered was that of his signature illusion, the Metamorphosis. "Can teach the act to anyone. This is the greatest trick mystery of the world. The price includes right of exhibiting same; drawings, complete instructions, explanations, introductory speech and all

secrets of box, sack, coat, braid and quick method of working." Harry was also offering to teach his Handcuff Escape. And he was parting with his own set of Punch-and-Judy puppets—"a nice act for museums, sideshows and parties." Apparently, he was serious about quitting the business.

Yet the catalog was intended not just for aspiring magicians. Available too were instructions for conducting a séance—for communicating (seemingly) with the spirits. "I teach and instruct thoroughly by mail in all branches of Spiritualism, slate writing and sleight of hand." Despite his reservations about fake mediumship, Harry was facilitating its practice. "Do you believe in Spiritualism?" he asked. "If not, why not? If you want to give manifestations or slate tests I can give you full instructions and make you a full fledged medium!"

An aspiring medium could purchase these instructions:

> How to materialize spirit forms; forms seemingly rise out of solid floor.
>
> How to cause a hand accordeon to give music, even though it is tied and sealed up.
>
> How to read folded papers in dark room.
>
> Fortune telling, as worked by Gipsies. The only real and sure method. With this secret you can tell anyone's past, present and future just as readily as the best medium in the world.
>
> Cabinet of Phantoms. Where medium's hands are held and still give manifestations.
>
> How Dr. Slade worked his slates.
>
> Lessons given in rope tying, Fantasmagoria, etc. Mediums instructed personally or by mail.

These techniques could be used simply to entertain—or for purposes of mediumistic deception. But Harry had yet to realize the *criminality* of that deception, and to be disturbed by it.

Martin Beck

Harry's early years had resembled a Horatio Alger novel. Yet even for an Alger hero, the virtues—ambition, industry, fortitude, perseverance, grit—are insufficient for attaining success. At some point in his tale, Ragged Dick or Phil the Fiddler or Paul the Peddler needs assistance. And invariably, fate provides it. His path crosses that of a wealthy benefactor, or a wise mentor, or a mysterious figure; and this patron helps him attain his goals. Harry too had such an encounter —with a powerful booking agent named Martin Beck.

Beck had a rags-to-riches tale of his own. Like Harry, he was a Hungarian Jew who had entered the U.S. at a young age—in Beck's case, sixteen. Unlike Harry, he did not arrive with his family. Instead, he belonged to a theatrical company—a troupe drawn to America by the prospect of work in vaudeville. But in Chicago the company disbanded, a common occurrence with such troupes. (As Harry could attest —the American Gaiety Company, the Marco Magic Company, and the California Concert Company had met similar ends.) And Beck found himself stranded and broke.

Answering an ad, he found employment at Engels, a beer hall on the South Side of Chicago; and his rise to wealth and power began. Starting out as a waiter, he became the bartender at Engels, then the cashier, then the bookkeeper, and finally the manager. To stimulate business, he enlarged the stage and brought in first-rate entertainers. Despite his youth, he was proving to be a capable manager. And he was developing an eye for talent.

Beck left Engels to manage a touring company called Schiller's Vaudeville. The company wound up in San Francisco, performing at the Orpheum Theatre—and then it too disbanded. But Beck stayed on at the Orpheum. He had impressed its owner, who hired him to manage the theatre. He did more than manage it. Within a year he had acquired four additional theatres for his employer, and created the Orpheum Circuit. A circuit was a network of theatres with a central booking office. As his circuit expanded,

Beck moved his office to Chicago, to be closer to the talent he was booking. He was on his way to becoming one of the most powerful men in vaudeville.*

Where was Harry at this time? He had put his School of Magic on hold and returned to performing. In December 1898 he and Bess traveled to Chicago, for a two-week engagement at Kohl & Middleton's dime museum. While in Chicago, he visited police headquarters and repeated his stunt of escaping from a jail cell—a feat that was gleefully reported in the newspapers.

Meanwhile, that fateful moment—that encounter with a benefactor—was drawing near. It arrived in March, at a boozy, smoke-filled hall in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Harry and Bess were performing at the Palm Garden, a beer hall on Seventh Street. Also on the bill were a contortionist, a song-and-dance act, and Miss Hunt, "the queen of the Roman rings." (Miss Hunt was a gymnast.) But the main act was the Houdinis. Harry describes what happened that evening:

> When working at a small hall in St. Paul, a party of managers, while sight-seeing, happened to come in. They saw

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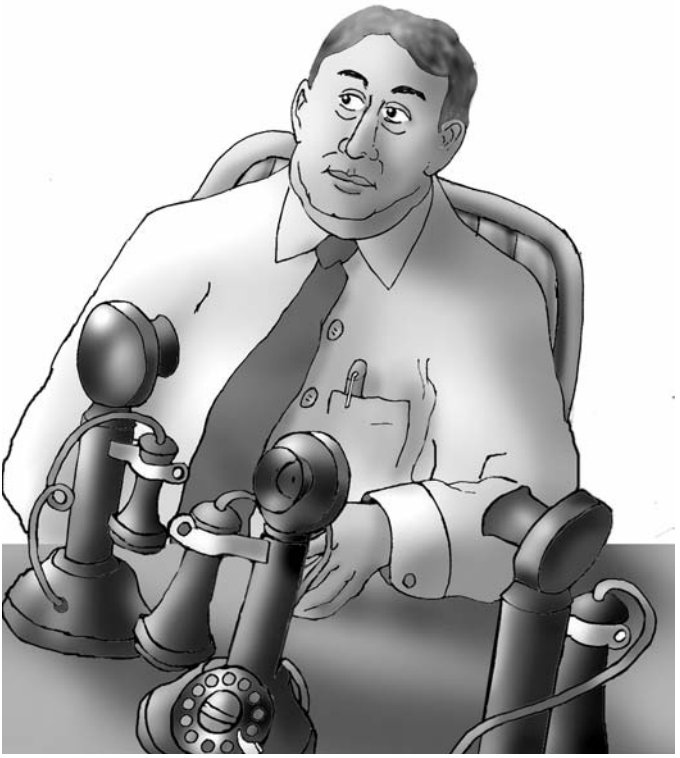
* By the 1920s, two syndicates would control vaudeville: the Orpheum Circuit in the West, extending from Chicago to San Francisco, and the Keith-Albee Circuit in the East. The former comprised some sixty theatres; and its booking agent was Martin Beck. Once under contract, performers circulated from theatre to theatre. They were assured a generous salary, travel expenses, and a full season's work. Everyone benefited—especially Beck.

He had become wealthy and powerful. With his wealth he built two palatial theatres in New York: the Palace—vaudeville's premier theatre—and the Martin Beck (since renamed the Al Hirshfeld, after the caricaturist). And with his power he could make or break a career. As a theatre owner Beck was known for his involvement in day-to-day management, and for his attention to detail. Famously, he had three telephones on his desk. "I am the staff of the Martin Beck Theatre," he told visitors to his office.

> my performance, became impressed with the manner in which I presented it, and one of them, Mr. Martin Beck, perhaps more in a joke than sincerity, challenged me to escape from one of his handcuffs. He had none with him, but next day purchased a few pairs and sent them on the stage. I escaped! He then booked me for one week, and it was the first chance I ever had had, and my act in a first-class theatre created a sensation....We have never looked back since.

Harry had received a telegram from Beck, a few days after their encounter: "YOU CAN OPEN OMAHA MARCH TWENTY SIXTH SIXTY DOLLARS, WILL SEE ACT PROBABLY MAKE YOU PROPOSITION FOR ALL NEXT SEASON." The telegram is preserved in one of Harry's scrapbooks. On it he



has written: "This wire changed my whole Life's journey."

What had drawn Beck to the Palm Garden that night? Perhaps he and those managers had been "sight-seeing" and had "happened to come in." More likely, he had heard about Harry's escape from a jail cell and wanted to see him on stage. In any case, he knew immediately that the act had potential. But he would insist that Harry simplify it. All the standard magic—the tricks with cards and doves and silks—was to be scrapped. Only the Handcuff Escape and Metamorphosis were to remain. In short, Harry was to transform himself from a magician into an escape artist. He would be billed as "Houdini the Handcuff King"—a specialty act that, in Beck's estimation (and his instincts rarely failed him), was certain to be a hit.

Audiences at the theatre in Omaha confirmed that judgment; and Harry signed a contract for a full season on the Orpheum Circuit. For five years he and Bess had been laboring in beer halls, dime museums, and small-time theatres. Now they were admitted to the big time. They had become vaudevillians.

The Handcuff King

The season was a whirlwind for Harry Houdini, as he traveled the circuit as an escape artist. There were engagements at major theatres; large and appreciative audiences; a rising salary; first-rate hotels; and for publicity, escapes from jail cells. He had quickly become a headliner—the main attraction on the bill. His new act featured the Handcuff Challenge, in which he offered to escape from any "regulation" handcuffs that were brought on stage. The act also included Metamorphosis, with its startling transposition. And while Bess was still his partner, they were no longer billed as "The Houdinis." Advertised on posters now, blazoned on marquees, and headlined on the bill was "Houdini the Handcuff King." An escape artist and his assistant were touring on the Western circuit.

The Orpheum and Keith-Albee circuits practiced reciprocity. So when the tour ended, Harry continued on to bookings in the East. At the Keith Theatre in Boston he appeared on the same bill as Chung Ling Foo. The Handcuff King chatted backstage with the Court Conjurer to the Empress of China. By this time, his pressbook was bulging with clippings and playbills—and with letters from police chiefs, attesting to his successful escape from their shackles and jail cells.

Serving as Harry's manager and agent, Beck played a dual role: advising him on his career and booking him at theatres. And while the two men had become friends, their egos often clashed. Strong-willed and independent, Harry chaffed under the control of a manager. And Beck was no ordinary manager. He was an autocrat who ran the Orpheum Circuit as his personal fiefdom. To performers he could be generous and supportive—or, if they displeased him, insulting and vindictive. A major power in vaudeville, Beck could foster a career or bring it to an end.

Harry's rise was the result of his talent as a performer—and of Beck's efforts on his behalf. He was grateful for those efforts. Yet the two friends were wont to bicker. Harry wanted higher salaries to be negotiated; resented the percentage that Beck was taking; and complained that Beck was doing little to advance his career to an even higher level. Beck responded to that complaint, in a letter of December 21, 1899:

> I have exerted myself to bring you where you are today, and endeavor certainly to boom you to the top notch. I assure you that I had a very hard road to travel, as no managers would believe that your new act was fit for vaudeville. They all considered it a museum act, and you know very well that it is my personal influence that makes managers believe differently.

It was that "top notch" to which Harry aspired. He wanted to be a full-fledged celebrity, not merely a headliner. And

he had a plan for accomplishing his goal. To "boom" himself, he would take the Handcuff Challenge to Great Britain and Europe. For it was in the theatres of London, Paris, and Berlin that prestige was conferred, reputations were gained, and celebrity was achieved.

Inspiration for this plan had come from the example of T. Nelson Downs, a friend (they had met at the Columbian Exposition) and fellow magician. The year before, Downs —who was billed as "the King of Koins"—had mailed his reviews and his poster to the manager of the Palace theatre in London. Impressed, the manager had booked him. Downs had crossed the ocean; become a popular act at the Palace; and headlined there for five months. He was now touring on the Continent and commanding a large salary.

The Handcuff King wanted to emulate the King of Koins. Surely there were opportunities abroad for a variety of Kings! So Beck contacted an associate—an international agent named Pitrot—and asked him to arrange bookings. And on May 30, 1900, the Houdinis sailed for England aboard the S.S. *Kensington.* Work awaited them, Pitrot had wired, in London and beyond.

Shipwrecked

Ten days later they disembarked in the port of Southampton. Harry staggered down the gangplank, having been seasick during much of the voyage. They took the train to London and found lodging at 10 Keppel Street, a theatrical boardinghouse popular with Americans.

Relieved to be on land, Harry took a walk. He describes it in a communiqué to the New York *Dramatic Mirror*:

> I arrived safe and sound in England and walked around the streets of London so as to become accustomed to the foggy air. While strolling about Leicester Square, I discovered quite a few "shipwrecked" American acts. When I say "shipwrecked," I mean acts that hail from America that

> failed to obtain a prolongation of contract, or that came over without being booked.

But relief soon gave way to dismay. For the Houdinis discovered that they were among the shipwrecked. No contracts, they learned, had been secured in their behalf. Apparently, the offers received by Pitrot had been tentative; and theatres were now having second thoughts about hiring an escape act—a type of act that was unfamiliar to them. Like a neophyte, Harry would have to submit to auditions —or "trials," as he disparagingly referred to them.

He began by visiting the Alhambra theatre, in Leicester Square, and meeting with the manager—for whom he had a letter of introduction. The letter was from a fellow passenger aboard the *Kensington*. During the voyage Harry had performed in a shipboard show, and had entertained with card tricks in the smoking room. The passengers had enjoyed his magic. One of them wrote him a letter of introduction to Dundas Slater, manager of the Alhambra.

The Alhambra was one of the leading music halls of London. An ornate, Moorish-style theatre with uniformed ushers, it had nearly two thousand seats, including a tier of private boxes. In its basement was a canteen, popular with male theatre-goers who liked to socialize with the dancers. The acts on its stage were similar to those of an American vaudeville house. Booking those acts was Dundas Slater.

Harry presented his letter of introduction and showed Slater his pressbook. William Hilliar, a British magician who was residing at the Keppel Street boardinghouse, describes what happened:

> When Houdini arrived in Europe he had no contract, nothing but a scrap book almost as large as an ordinary dress suit case. This he exhibited to Mr. Slater, the then manager of the Alhambra, and asked him for work. Mr. Slater pooh-poohed the idea, whereupon Houdini informed him he was going over to the Empire, the great rival theatre across the street, and take the Empire's manager with him

> to Scotland Yard and give him an ocular demonstration of his ability. This tempting bait caught Mr. Slater and he agreed to accompany Houdini to the famous English police headquarters, remarking upon his arrival to the inspector in charge, "I think this fellow is crazy—lock him up for a while." Houdini expostulated somewhat because he was handcuffed round a pole, but the officer replied, "That's the way we lock 'em up over here." Almost instantaneously freeing himself, Houdini replied, "This is the way we get out of them in America." This satisfied Mr. Slater who engaged Houdini on the spot. (*The Sphinx*, November 1906)

On his own the Handcuff King had secured a contract. No longer shipwrecked, he prepared to make his London debut.

Overnight Sensation

The day before opening at the Alhambra, Harry gave a private demonstration—a preview of the Handcuff Challenge. Invited were reporters and policemen, who were encouraged to bring their own handcuffs. Harry (who had studied British makes of handcuffs) astonished those present. As each pair was clamped upon his wrists, he entered his cabinet and freed himself.

Typical of reviews the next day was that of the *Morning Herald*: "A remarkably clever exhibit by Mr. Harry Houdini, who describes himself as the World's Greatest Mystifier and King of Handcuffs."

Drawn by the reviews, a large and expectant audience awaited him that night at the Alhambra. Harry did not disappoint them. In the audience was T. Nelson Downs, the King of Koins, who had urged him to take his act abroad. Seated with Downs was William Hilliar, who recalls:

> I was with Downs at the Alhambra theatre in London the night that Harry Houdini opened in Europe.
>
> When Houdini came down in the audience to borrow

> some handcuffs, Downs called him over to where we were sitting and the exchange of greetings between these two old friends, who had now both risen to positions of affluence was most cordial. Downs and I both thought at one time during the progress of his act that Houdini would get "stuck." He stayed in the cabinet an inordinately long time, and we both noticed that his charming little wife and helpmate was very nervous. The tension had almost reached the "snapping" point, when suddenly the cabinet burst open and Houdini rushed out—free. I shall never forget the storm of applause that greeted him. That one night was the foundation for his subsequent triumphs in Europe.

Harry had a two-week contract. But so popular was his act that the contract was extended to two months and his salary was raised. During July and August, he was a sensation in London—the talk of the town! Bess describes the reaction:

> Houdini proceeded to make a smashing hit....Each succeeding performance was of increased interest, for Houdini was a challenge to professional restrainers of all kinds, as well as to the amateur detectives of the press. Many persons brought irons and manacles to the theater—in all, a rich and varied assortment—to test the prowess of the young Handcuff King.

Slater wanted to keep him even longer; but Harry had secured bookings in Germany, beginning in September.

König der Handschellen

Originally, Harry had been scheduled to return home at the end of August, for bookings on the Keith Circuit that Beck had arranged. Instead, he would rise to fame in Britain and Europe—and remain abroad for the next four years.

After his triumph in London, the Handcuff King moved

on to Dresden, for a month-long engagement at the Central Theatre. Word of his remarkable escapes had preceded him; and the shows were sold-out nightly. His next booking was in Berlin; and for a month the *König der Handschellen* played to capacity houses at the Wintergarten, the city's most prestigious theatre. Harry was addressing these audiences in German—the language of his parents.

By Christmas he was back to London, for a return engagement at the Alhambra. To publicize it, Slater hired a dozen men to parade up and down the street, with signs that read ALHAMBRA–HOUDINI. Harry Houdini had risen to top billing—the first performer ever at the Alhambra to have his name placed above that of the dance corps. His celebrity (and his salary) had skyrocketed.

In the months that followed, the Houdinis toured England and Germany. In Essen the turnout was so large that a wall of the theatre was removed to create more standing room; while shows in Hamburg, Cologne, Munich, Frankfort and Leipzig drew similar crowds. In each city that he played, Harry would first visit the police; escape from their handcuffs or jail cell; and generate publicity for the show.

More bookings were being offered than he could fill. Moreover, imitators were springing up—shameless copycats with similar acts and even names. So Harry decided to replicate himself and keep the profits within the family. He wired his brother Dash: "COME OVER THE APPLES ARE RIPE."

Dash came over on the next ship. Harry tutored him in the act, and provided him with an assistant, props, evening clothes, bookings, and a stage name: Hardeen. The plan was to present him as a competitor—a rival claimant to the title of Handcuff King. Their supposed rivalry would make for lively publicity. Hardeen made his debut at the Olympia Theatre in Magdeburg.

And Harry sent for one other family member—his mother. Cecelia Weiss sailed in May; and Harry greeted her in Hamburg, where he was playing to sold-out houses at the Hansa Theatre. She was soon watching him perform and

proudly joining in the applause.

But the high point of her visit came in Budapest. Harry had arranged a family gathering in the city of his birth. The event was held at the Royal Hotel, in its Palm Garden salon. Harry had invited all of his Hungarian relatives, including Uncle Heller, the snob of the family. Heller had opposed Cecilia's marriage to Mayer Weiss and had refused to attend their wedding. Yet he showed up now at the reception, not adverse to being associated with Mayer's celebrated son.

Escorting his mother into the Palm Garden, Harry seated her amid its rococo furnishings. Cecelia was regally attired. For she was wearing a gown, acquired by Harry in London, that had been designed for Queen Victoria. (It fit perfectly, the two women being of similar bulk.) He praised his mother to the assembled guests. And he placed a crown upon her head—an excess of filial devotion, perhaps, but an occasion whose memory he would cherish:

> How my heart warmed to see the various friends and relatives kneel and pay homage to my mother, every inch a queen, as she sat enthroned in her heavily carved and gilded chair....That night, Mother and I were awake all night talking over the affair, and if happiness ever entered my life to its fullest, it was in sharing Mother's wonderful enjoyment at playing a queen for a day.

The reception at the Royal Hotel was meant to honor his mother. But it also served to validate Harry in the eyes of the family. A son of emigrants had returned to Europe and become its top variety act. The name "Houdini" was everywhere—lauded in the press; blazoned on posters; discussed in coffee shops. The Handcuff King was a sensation. And he was earning more money than he had ever dreamt possible.

"Not bad for Dime Museum Harry," he wrote in his diary.

Robert-Houdin

With its two thousand seats, the Olympia was the largest music hall in Paris. And during the months that he played there, the Handcuff King drew large crowds. Each night he performed his escapes; and the Olympia resounded with applause. Its cavelike acoustics, sumptuous decor, and far-flung balconies lent the theatre a grandeur that Harry—a veteran of sideshows, beer halls, and dime museums—found gratifying.

Yet a visit to a smaller theatre would prove equally gratifying. For during his stay in Paris, Harry made a pilgrimage. He and Bess were renting an apartment on the rue de Bellefond. One afternoon he took a cab from there to a destination on the boulevard des Italiens: the Théâtre Robert-Houdin. He bought a ticket; climbed a worn stairway to the second-floor of this modest venue; sat in one of its less than two hundred seats; and watched a magic show.

The theatre had been founded (at an earlier location) by Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, Harry's idol and namesake. Robert-Houdin had retired in 1852; and ownership of the theatre had passed to a succession of magicians. The current owner was Georges Méliès, who was both a magician and a pioneer filmmaker.*

Harry had come to the Théâtre Robert-Houdin as an act of veneration, like a pilgrim visiting a shrine. When the show ended, he spoke with Méliès. He learned that Robert-Houdin was buried in the town of Blois, and that a daughter-in-law was still alive. His pilgrimage was not yet complete, Harry realized. He resolved to meet with the daughter-in-law and obtain permission to lay a wreath upon the grave.

He wrote to her; but she refused to see him—declined to meet with the celebrated escape artist! Harry was stung by the rebuff. But undeterred, he took a train to Blois and met with another family member. This friendlier relation showed

* For more on Méliès, see *Lives of the Conjurers, Volume Two.*

him devices that Robert-Houdin had built, and told him that permission wasn't needed to visit the gravesite.

So Harry went to the cemetery and located the grave. Hat in hand, he stood there for half an hour. Finally, he bought a wreath and laid it upon the tomb of Robert-Houdin.

Harry Houdini had paid homage to his namesake—to the "father of modern magic" who had inspired him to become a magician.

Kleppini

After his stay at the Olympia, Harry was booked at an even larger venue: the 3000-seat tent of a German circus. The Corty-Althoff was the leading circus in Europe. It toured with more than a hundred variety artists, scores of horses, a ballet company, a full orchestra, and its own fire brigade. During the summer of 1902, its main attraction was Harry Houdini.

Imitators (with names like Harry Rudini and Harry Mourdini) had continued to copy his act; and while traveling with the circus, Harry learned that a scoundrel named Kleppini had gone even further. Kleppini was falsely claiming to have defeated him in a private contest. In "The French Letter Cuffs" (an account Harry published in *Conjurers' Monthly*), he describes his reaction upon learning of the claim:

> We were touring Holland, when a friend sent me a bill and newspaper clipping, announcing in huge, fat type that Kleppini was about to appear at Circus Sidoli, in Dortmund, Germany, after returning from Holland, where he had defeated the American, Houdini, at his own game. Kleppini further claimed that I had handcuffed him, only to see him escape, while I had met with defeat when handcuffed by him.
>
> This was more than pride could endure. I had a heated argument with my Herr Director, Althoff, who at first refused to allow me to follow up Kleppini and force him to

> retract; but when I said it was leave of absence or quit for good, he yielded, granted me five days' leave, and I left at once for Dortmund.

Carrying a valise filled with handcuffs, Harry checked into a hotel in Dortmund. That evening, at the Circus Sidoli, he took a seat near the ring. He had donned a disguise: false mustache and dark glasses.

> I found the attendance very light. Kleppini appeared, making his speech in which he claimed to have defeated me. Instantly I was on my feet, crying "*Nicht wahr*," meaning "Not true." He asked how I knew this, and I said I was in the know, whereupon he finally offered to wager that he was right. With that I took a flying leap of twenty-two feet downwards to the centre of the ring or *menage*, as it is called in Germany, and cried, "You say I am not telling the truth. Well, look! I am Houdini!"

Harry pulled off his disguise, glared at Kleppini, denounced him for making false claims, and announced a challenge. He would wager five thousand marks that Kleppini could not extricate himself from handcuffs that he, Harry Houdini, would provide. Kleppini was evasive, however, and declined to accept the challenge.

"So I returned to my seat," recounts Harry in "The French Letter Cuffs," "and the audience left the circus building in droves, disgusted by the misrepresentations."*

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* Or so he claims. According to a newspaper account, it was Houdini who left the building—thrown out for causing a disturbance!

In his autobiographical writings, Houdini is known to have exaggerated, embellished, misremembered, and even fabricated; and many of the details in his account of the Kleppini affair have been questioned. I have endeavored to include here solely those that seem factual (and to keep my own embellishing to a minimum).

The next day, the manager of the circus came to the hotel, bearing a message from Kleppini. Confident of his ability to escape from any pair of handcuffs, Kleppini had changed his mind and accepted the challenge.

On the evening of June 19th, the Circus Sidoli included among its acts the confrontation between Kleppini and Houdini. Posters had been hastily printed; and a sizeable audience was on hand to witness the event. Kleppini was sporting his usual regalia: bogus medals pinned to his jacket; a red ribbon with a faux-diamond pendant, draped around his neck like a royal honor; and a collar embroidered with the title of "Handcuff King."

Harry displayed the handcuffs that he had selected for the challenge—a unique type known as French letter cuffs. Used by the Paris police, they were opened, not by inserting a key, but by dialing a combination of letters. Only Harry knew the combination on this pair of cuffs. Ceremoniously, he snapped them onto his rival and addressed the audience: "Ladies and Gentlemen, you can all go home. I do not lock a cuff on a man merely to let him escape. If he tries this cuff until doomsday, he cannot open it."

Kleppini retreated to his cabinet and sought to open the handcuffs. But the attempt was hopeless, as he knew. His various picks, hidden inside the cabinet, were useless tonight. The locks on French cuffs could not be picked—for they lacked a keyhole.

Unable to extricate himself, he remained inside the cabinet—defeated, fuming, handcuffed like a criminal!—as the dancers came on. Eventually, Harry unlocked the cuffs and freed him. But not before the closing act had concluded; the audience had departed; and a spurious Handcuff King had been publicly humiliated.

Russia

The train from Berlin had stopped in Alexandrowo, a town on the Russian border; and guards had come aboard to examine passengers and baggage. Harry, his assistant

Franz Kukol, and Bess were on their way to Moscow. Their papers were in order; and Harry had obtained a special permit for his lock picks and other "burglar tools." But he had not anticipated the strictness of Tsarist censorship. He was traveling with a trunk-desk, containing his books and correspondence; and the guards would not allow it to enter the country. Any printed or written matter, they informed him, was held at the border until having been approved by a censor. Unwilling to hand over the trunk, Harry arranged instead for it to be sent back to Berlin. And he and his companions continued on to Moscow, for a month-long engagement at the Yar.

The Yar was both a restaurant and a variety theatre—a spacious dining room with a stage and a Gypsy orchestra. Known for its cuisine and lively entertainment, the Yar was a popular destination for the elite of Moscow. They chattered at its many tables; gossiped in its private boxes; drank to excess; and applauded the singers, dancers, and other acts that performed on its stage. And in the summer of 1903, they cheered as Harry Houdini—the European sensation, now come to Russia—escaped from handcuffs and chains.

In each city that he visited, Harry sought to generate publicity with a jail escape; and Moscow was no exception. Soon after his arrival, he issued a challenge to the police. He would escape, not from the usual jail cell, but from a *kareta* —a Siberian transport van. Clad in metal, the van was a traveling cell. (Harry describes it as "a large safe on wheels.") It was windowless, except for a small, barred opening in the door. Prisoners spent three weeks locked inside, as a team of horses transported them to Siberia.

Confident that he would fail, the police accepted the challenge. They also agreed to its two conditions: Harry would be allowed to examine the van in advance; and during the test, it would be backed up to a wall, with its door hidden from view and no one nearby.

The challenge took place in the courtyard of the Butirskaya Prison. Inside the prison Harry had been stripped and searched, to insure that no tools were hidden

on his person. His wrists and ankles had been handcuffed and manacled. Three policemen then brought him out to the courtyard, locked him in the van, and withdrew.

Forty-five minutes later, Harry stepped out from behind the van. Naked and unfettered, he waved to the police. To their astonishment, he had escaped from the handcuffs, the leg irons, and the transport van.

Freeing himself from the handcuffs and leg irons had probably been easy—such was his trade. But how did the Handcuff King get out of the van? The bars on its window were welded into place. The lock on its door was thirty inches below the window. And he had been searched for tools. How then had he gotten out? Harry never revealed the secret; but various theories have been put forth:

(1) During his examination of the van, he hid a lock pick inside it. Then, during the test, he simply stuck his arm out the window, reached down with the pick, and unlocked the door.

(2) He smuggled into the van two small tools: a sharp blade and a toothed wire. He was able to do so despite having been stripped and searched—by hiding them inside a false sixth finger. With the blade he cut through the zinc sheeting of the floor, exposing the board beneath; and with the wire he sawed through the board. Then he squeezed his way out through the underbelly of the van. (This explanation is found in *The Secret Life of Houdini* [2006] by William Kalush and Larry Sloman.)

(3) Harry Houdini had genuine, supernatural powers. Using them, he dematerialized, then rematerialized outside the van!

(4) He bribed a senior police official, who provided him with a key. Bribery, a standard practice in Tsarist Russia, had made possible his escape from the van. It was like a magic trick. A hundred rubles had disappeared from the hand of a magician (into the pocket of an official). And in their place had appeared a key.

Somehow, Harry had gotten out of a locked transport van. Eager for publicity, he had wanted reporters to be pres-

ent; but the police had not allowed them to attend. Nonetheless, word of his successful escape quickly spread. As a result, the shows at the Yar were sold out each night; his salary was doubled; and he was held over. The *Courant*, an illustrated weekly, ran a cartoon that showed him escaping from the van as the police look on in dismay.

Yet all did not go smoothly. During one of the shows, Harry had a confrontation with an army officer:

> Several officers stepped upon the stage, to act as a committee, and one of them was very arrogant, and would insist on standing in the centre of the stage, thereby obstructing the view of the audience. In my politest Russian I asked him to step aside, but instead of so doing, he demanded how I, a common menial, dare even address him. I honestly did not know what he meant, and again asked him to step aside and this time omitting "Please." The officer became enraged and planted himself right down in the midst of the footlights, refused to budge, and commanded me to go on with the performance.
>
> By this time I knew that he was someone of high rank, from the way the rest of the folks about bowed, scraped and fawned to him; so I thought that the best thing I could do was to inform the audience that unless this officer stood aside I would refuse to go on with the show. (*Conjurers' Monthly*, December 1906)

When the officer still refused to move, Harry asked that the curtain be brought down. Cries of protest arose from the audience. The manager of the Yar came on stage and took Harry aside. He explained that entertainers in Russia occupied a position at the low end of the social hierarchy, along with laborers. The officer—who was Prince Mukhransky—would not allow a social inferior to tell him what to do. The manager whispered a suggestion.

Harry agreed to give it a try. He approached the officer and told him that, in America, the celebrated Houdini was a personage of the highest social standing. He was a wealthy

man. In fact, he was a millionaire.

A *millionaire!* The word seemed to have a magical effect upon the officer, who was suddenly deferential. "He profusely apologized to the audience and to me," recounts Harry, "and stepped aside."

After his success at the Yar, Harry went on to perform at cabarets in Moscow; the Nischni-Novgorad fair on the banks of the Volga; and the palace of the Grand Duke Sergius, for members of the royal family. For his performances at the palace, he was paid a substantial amount.

Finally, in September, Harry, Bess, and Kukol boarded a train and headed back to Germany. They had been in Russia for nearly five months. The tour had been profitable; and Harry Houdini had made a profound impression upon audiences. Invariably, they had been left wondering, "How does he do it?"

Winston Churchill famously referred to Russia as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." But Houdini, with his miraculous escapes, had been a mystery even to the Russians.*

The *Mirror* Challenge

On a Thursday afternoon in March, an audience of four thousand, including scores of journalists, had filled the Hippodrome Theatre in Leicester Square. They had come to see Harry Houdini endeavor to escape from the Mirror Cuffs—a set of handcuffs with a unique lock. According to its maker, a blacksmith who had spent years perfecting it, the lock was impossible to pick. It could be opened only with the key.

Five days earlier, before a smaller audience, Harry had

* The Churchill quote is seldom given in full: "Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian self-interest." The key to Houdini was that he could open virtually any lock—without a key—and that he was a consummate showman.

offered to escape from any "regulation police handcuffs" that were brought up onto the stage. Among those who had come forward was a representative of the *Daily Illustrated Mirror*. Producing a pair of cuffs of an unusual design, the newspaperman had challenged the Handcuff King to escape from them. "Will you permit me to fasten these on your wrists?" he had asked.

After examining the cuffs, Harry had declined to accept the challenge from the *Mirror*. "They are not regulation pattern," he had objected. "I will have nothing to do with them."

But the representative, encouraged by the audience, had persisted in the challenge. And he had taunted Harry: "If you again refuse to put on these handcuffs, my contention is that you are no longer entitled to use the words 'Handcuff King.'"

"Make a match of it!" someone had shouted. Finally, Harry had acquiesced and agreed to don the Mirror Cuffs (as they became known) at a special Thursday matinee.

His initial refusal to accept the challenge seemed prudent. For the Mirror Cuffs contained a Bramah lock. With its intricate array of tumblers, the Bramah was considered to be the most secure type of lock. The next day, an article in the *Mirror* described the cuffs and their potential effect on Houdini's reputation:

> The handcuff is in the shape of a figure 8, with what looks like part of a rifle barrel attached. There are twenty-one wards [ridges and slots] in the lock, which is for all intents and purposes a lock within a lock.
>
> All were agreed that the *Daily Illustrated Mirror* has set Houdini the mightiest task of his life, and if he emerges successfully from it everyone can safely assume that no mortal man breathes who can forge fetters for "America's Mysteriarch."
>
> On the other hand many were asking at midnight on Saturday: "Has Houdini met his Waterloo?"

At Thursday's matinee, the battle was joined. Earlier in the day, the *Mirror*—which was energetically promoting the event—had reported that the public was eagerly anticipating it:

> The keenest excitement prevails throughout London about the handcuff test which will be decided at the London Hippodrome this afternoon....Since Saturday night last London has done nothing but talk about the coming test. "Will Houdini free himself?" people have incessantly asked one another.

The show was sold out, with hundreds standing. Six other acts (Segommer, Frobel and Ruge, the Three Ramoniers, Arnesen, the Three Romas, and "the droll eccentric Marceline") preceded Houdini on the bill. But as these artists performed, the audience impatiently awaited the Handcuff King and his donning of the Mirror Cuffs.

At last, the orchestra played a rousing number; and Harry, in his frock coat, strode onto the stage. The ovation that greeted him (the *Mirror* would describe it as "an ovation worthy of a monarch") resounded from the dome of the theatre. He was joined by the newspaper's representative (who received "a hearty burst of applause"); and the two shook hands.

A committee was formed, of forty volunteers from the audience, to insure fair play. They lined up in front of the stage. The representative displayed the cuffs and described the workings of the lock. The *Mirror* challenged Houdini to escape from them, he said. Then he snapped them onto Harry's wrists; turned the key six times; and announced that the bolt had been secured.

Committee members inspected the cuffs and verified that they were solidly built and securely fastened. Then Harry addressed the audience, in a stentorian voice: "I am now locked up in a handcuff that has taken a British mechanic five years to make. I don't know whether I am going to get out of it or not. But I can assure you I am going

to do my best." His resolve elicited a round of applause.

He entered his cabinet, crouched down, and drew the curtain. The orchestra began to play a waltz. The time was 3:15.

At 3:37 Harry peered out from behind the curtain, prompting cries of "He's free!" But the cheering gave way to groans of disappointment, when it turned out that he only wanted to examine the lock in better light. He did so and withdrew into the cabinet.

At 3:50 he peered out again. He looked uncomfortable, and said that his knees hurt from crouching. But he assured the audience: "I am not done yet!"; and again they cheered his resolve. A cushion was brought out. "The *Mirror* has no desire to submit Mr. Houdini to a torture test," said the representative, "and if Mr. Houdini will permit me, I shall have great pleasure in offering him the use of this cushion." Harry took the cushion and withdrew into the cabinet, as the music resumed.

At 4:10 he pulled aside the curtain and stepped out of the cabinet. His wrists were still locked in the cuffs; and he was sweating profusely. The *Mirror* would report:

> Almost a moan broke over the vast assemblage as this was noticed. He looked in pitiable plight from his exertions and much exhausted.
>
> He looked about for a moment, and then advanced to where his challenger stood.
>
> "Will you remove the handcuffs for a moment," he said, "in order that I may take my coat off?"
>
> For a few seconds the journalist considered. Then he replied: "I am indeed sorry to disoblige you, Mr. Houdini, but I cannot unlock those cuffs unless you admit you are defeated."

But Harry was determined to remove his coat:

> He maneuvered until he got a penknife from his waistcoat pocket. This he opened with his teeth, and then, turn-

ing his coat inside out over his head, calmly proceeded to cut it to pieces.

The novelty of the proceeding delighted the audience, who yelled themselves frantic. The *Mirror* representative had rather a warm five minutes of it at this juncture. Many of the audience did not see the reason of his refusal, and expressed their disapproval of his action loudly.

Freed of the coat, Harry re-entered the cabinet and drew the curtain.

Ten minutes more of anxious waiting, and then a surprise

was in store for everybody.

The band was just finishing a stirring march when, with a great shout of victory, Houdini bounded from the cabinet, holding the shining handcuffs in his hand—free!

A mighty roar of gladness went up. Men waved their hats, shook hands one with the other. Ladies waved their handkerchiefs, and the committee, rushing forward as one man, shouldered Houdini, and bore him in triumph round the arena.

That night the *Mirror* received a telegram at its offices, praising its representative for sportsmanlike conduct:

> Allow me to thank you for the open and upright manner in which your representative treated me in to-day's contest. Must say that it was one of the hardest, but at the same time one of the fairest tests I ever had.
>
> HARRY HOUDINI

The test at the Hippodrome had been entertaining—a spectacle whose conclusion had elicited "a mighty roar of gladness." But had it been difficult, as Houdini was claiming? And had it been fair?

Unsuspected by those who had cheered and waved their hats and handkerchiefs, it had been neither. For the test was almost certainly a staged event—a collusion between Houdini and the *Mirror*. They had posed as adversaries, when in fact they were partners. The contest had been rigged, with its outcome—Houdini freeing himself after a lengthy "ordeal"—never in doubt.

While no direct evidence has come to light, the case for collusion is convincing. Houdini was friends with Alfred Charles Harmsworth, the publisher of the *Mirror*, and could easily have made a secret deal. Nor would he have agreed to don a pair of handcuffs unless certain of success—his reputation depended on it. And both parties benefited from the challenge: the *Mirror* with a dramatic rise in circulation; Houdini with a wealth of publicity. (One of his

scrapbooks contains seventy-five newspaper articles about the *Mirror* challenge.)

It is also significant that he does not seem to have checked the handcuffs before donning them. Since an infuriating incident, he always began by locking and unlocking a pair of cuffs, to make sure the challenger had not tampered with them. But there was no need to check the Mirror Cuffs: his partner could be trusted.

But the strongest evidence for collusion is the fact that he succeeded in freeing himself. How was Houdini able to escape from handcuffs whose lock could not be picked—handcuffs that could be opened only with a key? The likely answer: *he had a copy of the key*. Provided by the *Mirror*, it was in his pocket. When his "ordeal" had gone on long enough, he used it to unlock the cuffs. Then he burst in triumph out of the cabinet.

Among magicians, the consensus is that Houdini had a key. "I can *assure* you," the Amazing Randi has declared, "that the *Mirror* handcuffs were not opened with anything but the key." And David Copperfield (in whose private collection the Mirror Cuffs currently reside) agrees that Houdini and the *Mirror* colluded. "There is only one way he could have gotten out of it," insists Copperfield. "He was able to get a newspaper to collaborate on a charade to get themselves publicity."

Houdini was a master at picking locks; but he was also a master of deception. And if a deception required using a confederate from the audience—or colluding with the *Daily Illustrated Mirror*—he had no scruples about doing so. The goal was to mystify, by whatever means, and thereby to entertain.

Evanion

Harry was scheduled to appear next at a theatre in Newcastle. But a severe cold forced him to cancel the engagement; and his doctor confined him to his hotel room in London. While there, he was interviewed by a reporter.

Mentioned in the resulting article was an assortment of old handbills, theatre programs, and newspaper clippings, scattered about the room. For the Handcuff King had developed an acute interest in the history of conjuring; and his financial success had enabled him to become an avid collector of memorabilia.

A fellow collector saw the article and sent Houdini a note. It apprised him of a trove of historical material, owned by the collector, that was available for purchase. Hastily scrawled, the note was signed "Evanion." In *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin* (1908), Houdini describes their initial meeting:

> I wrote at once asking him to call at one o'clock the next afternoon, but as the hour passed and he did not appear, I decided that, like many others who asked for interviews, he had felt but a passing whim. That afternoon about four o'clock my physician suggested that, as the day was mild, I walk once around the block. As I stepped from the lift, the hotel porter informed me that since one o'clock an old man had been waiting to see me, but so shabby was his appearance, they had not dared send him up to my room. He pointed to a bent figure, clad in rusty raiment. When I approached the old man he rose and informed me that he had brought some clippings, bills, etc., for me to see. I asked him to be as expeditious as possible, for I was too weak to stand long and my head was a-whirl from the effects of la grippe.
>
> With some hesitancy of speech but the loving touch of a collector he opened his parcel.
>
> "I have brought you, sir, only a few of my treasures, sir, but if you will call—"
>
> I heard no more. I remember only raising my hands before my eyes, as if I had been dazzled by a sudden shower of diamonds. In his trembling hands lay priceless treasures for which I had sought in vain—original programmes and bills of Robert-Houdin, Phillippe, Anderson, Breslaw, Pinetti, Katterfelto, Boaz, in fact all the conjuring celebri-

ties of the eighteenth century, together with lithographs long considered unobtainable, and newspapers to be found only in the files of national libraries. I felt as if the King of England stood before me and I must do him homage.

Physician or no physician, I made an engagement with him for the next morning, when I was bundled into a cab and went as fast as the driver could urge his horse to Evanion's home, a musty room in the basement of No. 12 Methley Street, Kennington Park Road, S.E.

In the presence of his collection I lost all track of time. Occasionally we paused in our work to drink tea which he

> made for us on his pathetically small stove. The drops of the first tea which we drank together can yet be found on certain papers in my collection. His wife, a most sympathetic soul, did not offer to disturb us, and it was 3:30 the next morning, or very nearly twenty-four hours after my arrival at his home, when my brother, Theodore Weiss (Hardeen), and a thoroughly disgusted physician appeared on the scene and dragged me, an unwilling victim, back to my hotel and medical care.
>
> Such was the beginning of my friendship with Evanion.

The friendship was with a fellow performer as well as collector. For until his retirement, Evanion had made a living as a magician. Henry Evans (his given name) was born in London in 1832. His father sold refreshments in the Vauxhall Gardens, and later operated a pub called the Black Prince. Evans first performed magic at the age of seventeen. Early in his career, he adopted the stage name of Evanion. (It was meant to sound French.)

He was primarily a drawing-room, or parlor, magician, entertaining in private homes for both adults and children. His clientele included the well-to-do; and on several occasions he performed for Queen Victoria and the Royal Family. But he also appeared in theatres, when the opportunity arose. The *Morning Advertiser* reviewed one of those appearances:

> He is not only a very skilful professor of the art of legerdemain, but he is happy in possessing a rich vein of comic humour....the result is to excite laughter as well as wonder....His performance afforded the utmost amusement to all present, and he was warmly applauded throughout.

His handbills advertised Evanion as the Royal Conjurer (capitalizing on those performances for the Queen), and promised such illusions as the Flags of All Nations and the Inexhaustible Bottle—"astounding feats" whereby he "baffles the keenest observer."

Meanwhile, he had become a collector of handbills and other ephemera that related to the history of conjuring. His father had passed on to him a small collection of such material. At antiquarian bookstores he tracked down more, and would miss a meal, it was said, in order to pay for a purchase. And he had befriended James Savren, a magician's assistant with a similar collection—which Evanion acquired after Savren died. Obsessively, he continued to make acquisitions.

By the 1890s his collection had grown to more than five thousand items—a veritable treasure-trove. At the same time, his career was faltering. His health had declined, as had the quality of his show. "In his later years," reports Sidney Clarke in *The Annals of Conjuring*, "he earned a precarious pittance by occasional performances at school treats, small institutions, and the like." His wife ran a candy store, bringing in another pittance. And they had become impoverished. So in 1895 Evanion sold a portion of his collection to the British Museum. Nine years later, he sold to Harry much of what remained.

Thereafter, whenever in London, Harry would visit him and make additional purchases. He also hired Evanion to conduct research at the British Museum. And Harry was playing at a theatre in Wigan, when word reached him that Evanion was dying.

Harry rushed to London and found Evanion in Lambeth Infirmary, barely able to speak. But the dying magician was able to communicate two requests. He asked Harry to arrange a decent burial for him, and to provide for his wife. Harry promised to do both.

For the rest of her days, his widow was assisted financially by Harry. She was the first of many. With his newfound wealth, Harry became not only a collector but a benefactor. He supported a growing number of magicians and others who, late in life, had become poverty stricken. Moved by their plight, he provided them with pensions. In *The Life and Many Deaths of Harry Houdini*, Ruth Brandon reports:

These good deeds went unremarked; sometimes even he was unaware of his commitments. He was once joyfully greeted by a man who, when Houdini pushed him aside and said he didn't know him, protested, "But you have been paying my rent for the past eleven years!"

Home

In May of 1904, the Handcuff King played to large audiences at the Hippodrome. (The show featured his first commercial tie-in: an escape from a packing crate, provided by a staircase manufacturer.) He and Bess then departed for the U.S. They had spent the last four-and-a-half years abroad. Harry's goal had been to make a name for himself; for it was in the theatres of London and Paris that reputations were forged. Not only had he succeeded in doing so—he had become a sensation. Now he was heading home for a vacation. He wanted to see his mother, whom he had missed during those years.

The Houdinis sailed to New York aboard the *Deutschland*. A fellow-passenger was Martin Beck, who had been traveling in search of new acts for the Orpheum Circuit. It was an unexpected reunion for the two friends. Beck was surprised to learn that the Houdinis were traveling second-class—surely, he protested, they could afford first-class tickets. Beck even offered to pay the difference. But Harry's habits of frugality were deeply engrained (he also avoided first-class hotels and restaurants); and he declined the offer. He would be equally seasick in a first-class cabin, he told Beck, so why pay more?

Harry remained in the U.S. for three months. Originally, he had considered staying longer and touring on the Keith Circuit; but Keith refused to pay the $1000 per week that had become his standard salary. The vacation was a busy one. First, he spent time in New York with his mother, Dash, and other family members. Then he and Dash headed west to see old friends. In Chicago they visited with Augustus Roterberg, the maker of magical apparatus. In

Milwaukee, where the Weiss family had lived on charity, they gave money to several elderly women—old family friends who were indigent. And in Appleton they looked up boyhood pals.

That summer Harry made three major purchases. He acquired a burial plot for the family, in the Machpelah Cemetery on Long Island. He bought a farmhouse in Connecticut, for use as a summer retreat. And he purchased a rowhouse, a three-story brownstone, at 278 West 113th Street in Harlem. Into it he moved his mother and two of his siblings—along with his growing collection of books and theatrical memorabilia, which he had been shipping to a warehouse. Cecilia, still living in the tenement on East Sixty-ninth Street—her longtime home—reluctantly took up residence in the brownstone.

In August the Houdinis sailed back to the U.K., to spend another year there and in Europe. The season was fully booked. It began at a theater in Glasgow, where the Handcuff King thrilled audiences with escapes from a straitjacket and a sealed coffin. It seemed that nothing—not the restraining mantle of the mad nor the depository of the dead—could contain him.

Next he made a "triumphal progress through England," reports Kellock in *Houdini: The Life-Story*. The tour set box-office records. "Almost everywhere the crowds were unprecedented....On several occasions, after the show, the audience formed in tumultuous parade and cheered him to his lodgings, where they would remain until he made a speech from his window." In addition to handcuffs, Harry was now escaping from packing crates that had been nailed shut. The crates were provided by the shipping departments of local businesses. Credited on-stage, the businesses welcomed the free advertising.

Word of those crowds reached the booking agents for the Keith Circuit; and Harry received a cable from them. They were offering him a contract at $1000 per week—the salary they had previously refused to pay. Pleased to have prevailed, he signed on for the following season.

Thus, in July the Houdinis returned to New York, settling into the house they had acquired. And in October Harry opened at the Colonial Theatre. It was the beginning of a three-year stay in America. During that time he would tour, to rising acclaim, throughout the country. But whenever possible, he would come back to New York—to the brownstone in Harlem, his collection of books, and his mother.

Challenges

During a seven-week engagement in Boston, soon after his return to America, Harry included a new escape in his act. He was imprisoned inside a barrel, whose lid was secured with straps and padlocks. The barrel was placed inside a wooden cell, which was also secured with padlocks. Curtains were placed around the cell; and the orchestra struck up a march.

Five minutes later, Harry emerged from behind the curtains. Both the cell and the barrel were still padlocked. When the barrel was opened, Franz Kukol, his Austrian assistant, was inside.

As he toured on the circuit, the Handcuff King was still offering to escape from any pair of handcuffs that were brought to the stage. But he began now (inspired perhaps by that barrel escape) to promote an additional challenge. He offered to escape from *anything*. Local manufacturers were invited to provide a suitable receptacle. (Like the providers of packing crates in England, they would gain free advertising.) Brought on stage, their product was sealed shut with Houdini inside; and curtains were placed around it. Invariably he got out.

These challenges became a special feature of his act. In the years after his return to the U.S., he escaped from a roll-top desk (provided by the Derby Desk Company); a glass box (the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company); a piano case (the Knabe Piano Company); a boiler (the Riverside Boiler Works); a giant envelope (the Hogan Envelope Company);

and a coffin (the National Casket Company). He escaped from a milk churn, a safe, a mail pouch, and a giant football that was carried on stage by the University of Pennsylvania football team.

None of these could hold him. It should be noted that they were often delivered to the theatre several days prior to the challenge and displayed in the lobby. Their presence served to generate publicity. But it also gave Harry an opportunity to examine them, plot his escape, and make secret alterations.

To further generate publicity, he was still doing jail breaks. Among them were escapes from a cell at the City Tombs in Boston (and from the jailhouse as well), and from a cell (deemed so secure that it had housed the assassin of President Garfield) at the federal prison in Washington. He was also attracting crowds with a seemingly dangerous

stunt: a bridge leap. Having alerted the press, he would leap from a bridge into the local harbor or river—his wrists handcuffed behind his back. The crowds cheered (and Bess murmured relief) when he burst from the water, triumphantly dangling the cuffs.

And beginning in 1906, Harry took on a different sort of challenge—as an author. He published a 96-page book titled *The Right Way to Do Wrong: An Exposé of Successful Criminals*. Intended to be sold in theatre lobbies, it revealed the methods of con artists, pickpockets, fake mediums, and other wrongdoers. In its preface, Harry (a deceiver himself!) states his purpose in writing: "I trust this book will afford entertaining, as well as instructive reading, and that the facts and experiences, the exposés and explanations here set forth may serve to interest you, as well as put you in a position where you will be less liable to fall a victim."

That same year he published the inaugural issue of *Conjurers' Monthly*, a trade journal of which he was both the editor and chief contributor. *Conjurers' Monthly* featured articles on the history of magic, based on his research. (Offered in the first issue was "Unknown Facts Concerning Robert Houdin.") He also printed diatribes against his imitators and settled scores with his enemies. Unlike *The Right Way to Do Wrong* (which was either ghostwritten or professionally edited), *Conjurers' Monthly*—with its unpolished style, colloquialisms, and lapses in grammar and spelling—was clearly the work of its proprietor.

He also wrote a children's story that appeared in the Sunday supplement of the *New York World*. "Bahl Yahn the Strong Man" is about a circus strongman. A giant of great strength, Bahl Yahn has promised to take care of his widowed mother. But he is abducted and ends up far from home, performing in a circus sideshow. And he forgets about his mother. But one day an old woman, accompanied by her grandson, visits the sideshow. Struck by the boy's solicitude for her, Bahl Yahn is reminded of his promise. And he returns home to take care of his mother.

Was the Handcuff King writing about himself?

Milk Can

For three years Harry Houdini toured on the Keith Circuit as a headliner. He was the highest paid performer in vaudeville. But then his career began to falter. Numerous imitators had sprung up, who could be booked for less money. And audiences were growing tired of the handcuff escape. Peering out over the footlights each night, he saw an increasing number of empty seats.

By the end of 1907, the decline was apparent. At a theatre in St. Louis, the manager told him bluntly that he no longer served as a drawing card. "You aren't worth a five-dollar bill to me." And arriving at a theatre in Cleveland, he was dismayed to learn that top billing had gone to someone else—an actor who did a sketch called "The Fifth Commandment." He lamented in his diary: "No attention paid to me."

These incidents were humiliating. But they convinced him that his act had to be revitalized. The handcuff challenge had outlived its popularity and needed to be replaced—by a new and sensational escape that would restore him to top billing.

He had already been working on a new escape—one that he planned to advertise as death-defying. An inventor in Chicago had built the apparatus for him. He conducted preliminary trials, to confirm its safety. And on January 25, 1908, Harry debuted the Milk Can Escape.

Brought onstage, the Milk Can glinted in the spotlight. A committee from the audience inspected it. The Milk Can was a metal container, large enough to hold a man. It resembled those used by farmers to transport milk. But only once (for a commercial tie-in with a dairy) would it ever contain milk. Instead, the assistants were bringing out buckets of water. They filled the can to its brim.

Harry went offstage, returned in a bathing suit, and described what was about to happen. Handcuffs would be fastened to his wrists, he told the audience. He would then submerge himself in the water. The lid of the can would be

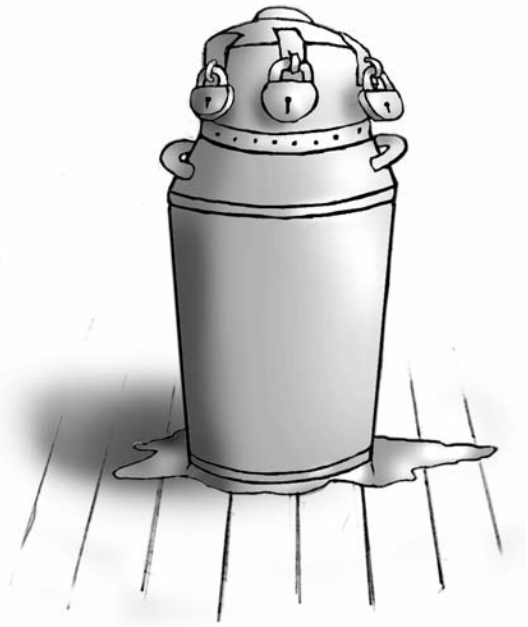
clamped into place and secured with padlocks, with no air space remaining between it and the water. Thus imprisoned, he would escape from the Milk Can. Failure to do so, he declared in a somber tone, could prove deadly.

But first, to reassure the audience, he demonstrated his ability to remain under water for a prolonged period. Asking them to hold their breaths and compare their endurance with his, he climbed into the can; took a deep breath; and submerged himself. Milbourne Christopher, in *Houdini: The Untold Story*, describes the result:

> Within thirty seconds the majority was gasping for air. Still he remained submerged. After a minute passed, it was a rare athlete who still had control. Long after the final gasp on the other side of the footlights, Houdini still was submerged. His endurance feat alone produced mighty applause.

Emerging from the water, Harry acknowledged the applause. Then he held out his hands and said he was ready.

> Houdini's wrists were handcuffed. Again he slid down under the water. Once more additional liquid was added to compensate for the overspill. Quickly the top of the can was jammed in place, then secured with six padlocks. A cabinet was pushed forward to cover the receptacle and the curtains were closed. The orchestra played: "Many brave hearts lie asleep in the deep. Sailor, beware; sailor, take care." Time ticked by. Thirty seconds. One minute. *Ninety* seconds. Eyes suddenly were diverted as Franz Kukol appeared with a fire ax in his hands. He walked quickly to the side of the cabinet, put his ear to the cloth, then gripped the ax more firmly. Two minutes. The tension was almost unbearable.
>
> Two minutes and a half. Nervous women bit their lips. Men furrowed their brows. Three minutes. Something must have gone wrong. Any second the assistant would slash the curtains and cut into the can to give Houdini air.



Kukol raised the ax to a striking position. At this moment the smiling, dripping-wet Houdini stepped out to accept a rafter-shaking ovation.

And the curtains were drawn aside, to show the Milk Can—its lid still locked in place.

The Milk Can Escape was the sensation he had hoped for. A death-defying feat—one that brought spectators to the edge of their seats and that mystified them. Overnight, it revived his career. Managers fought to book him. Shows were sold out. Once again he was a headliner.

Touring

After a coast-to-coast tour, Harry returned to Europe—with his new and acclaimed act. In September of 1908 he opened at the Cirkus Busch in Berlin. Gone was the handcuff challenge; hereafter, he would use handcuffs only as an accessory to other escapes. He even published a book titled

Handcuff Secrets, whose revelations, he may have hoped, would put his despised imitators out of business. Featured now was the Milk Can Escape (whose danger served to discourage imitators). He was performing this feat, along with the Hindoo Needle Trick, card tricks, and the straitjacket escape, to packed houses.

In addition, he was still accepting challenges from local businesses. These included several breweries, who challenged him to escape from a Milk Can that was filled with their beer. (Harry, a lifelong teetotaler, did not drink beer; but he had no objection to submerging himself in it.) He continued to escape from packing crates. And in England he accepted a unique challenge—from a group of suffragettes who were seeking publicity for their cause. Garbed in the flowery hats of the day, six suffragettes came on stage. They wrapped him tightly in wet sheets and strapped him to a bed-frame. And he was about to begin his struggles, when one of the women leaned over and kissed him. Mortified, their captive hastened to free himself.

More popular than ever, Harry toured Europe and Britain, traveling by rail with his team and equipment. He also returned to America for a season, and spent several months in Australia. His team was growing; and by 1910 he had acquired three loyal assistants. The first to be hired, a decade earlier, had been Franz Kukol. A former Austrian army officer, Kukol was adept at dealing with local officials. More recently, two Englishmen, Jim Collins and Jim Vickery, had been taken on. Collins, a cabinet-maker and master mechanic, was in charge of the equipment. All of the assistants had to sign an oath. They swore never to reveal any of Harry's secrets or to betray him. It was reminiscent of the pledge he had exacted of his wife and brother, on the moonlit bridge at Coney Island.

A century ago, the leading magicians traveled in private railway cars that were attached to regular trains. With his phenomenal success, Harry could now afford to avail himself of that privilege. He, Bess, the assistants, and Charlie, the Houdinis' dog, occupied one of two cars. The other car

was for their baggage: the Milk Can (and two spares, in case of damage); buckets for filling it; a Milk Can that wasn't "gimmicked" (it lacked the trick top), for public display; a crate for underwater escapes; the Metamorphosis trunk (still occasionally used); handcuffs, keys, picks, and padlocks; straitjackets; and the wardrobe (evening dress and bathing suits for Harry; gold-trimmed uniforms for the assistants). The car also contained his travel library: a hundred or so books, for research into magic history. And with a large collection of tools, it served as a mobile shop. Even en route, equipment could be repaired by the resourceful Collins.

In these two cars the troupe traveled from engagement to engagement. Upon arriving in a city, Harry would generate publicity with a bridge leap into the local river. In Berlin, he plunged into the Spree; in Bremen, into the Weser; in Paris, into the Seine. And arriving at the theatre—where he had top billing—he was given three dressing rooms: one for himself; one for the assistants; and one in which to set up a tool shop. An engagement might last for several weeks. When it ended, Harry hosted an on-stage party, inviting the stagehands, the musicians, and his fellow performers. Then Collins supervised the reloading of the baggage car. The cars were hitched to a train; and the act was on its way to another city.

As the train sped through the countryside, Harry and Bess sat in their compartment, with Charlie curled up at their feet. The rumble of the wheels and the piercing whistle may have reminded them of another train: that of the Welsh Brothers Circus. On that train they had been crammed into a narrow cubicle; their neighbors had been a noisy troupe of acrobats, clowns, and musicians. On this train the accommodations were comfortable; the car was quiet; and Harry had become a headliner, drawing a large salary. Yet nothing had really changed in fifteen years. They were still itinerants, traveling from theatre to theatre in pursuit of a livelihood.

Water Torture Cell

After four years as the centerpiece of his act, the Milk Can Escape—like the Handcuff Challenge before it—had outlived its popularity and needed to be replaced. Moreover, despite the danger, imitators had arisen. A Milk Can was even listed in the catalog of the Mysto Magic Company (though most of those purchasing it probably elected to escape from a waterless can).

Once again, Harry realized that his act had to be revitalized. And for nearly a year he had been developing a replacement for the Milk Can. In his notes he refers to this new feat as "Upside Down." It was intended to be as sensational as its predecessor—*and even more death-defying*. "I believe it is the climax of all my labors and studies," he declared. "Never will I be able to construct anything that will be more dangerous or difficult for me to do."

The actual construction was done for him at a machine shop in England, by skilled craftsmen. The Water Torture Cell, as it was named, was a glass-fronted tank. Five-and-a-half-feet tall, it was made of mahogany, with a steel frame for the glass. It resembled a phone booth or a fish tank. Like the stocks of old that exposed an offender to public derision, the wooden lid had two holes in it—for Harry's ankles. At the top of the cell were brass hasps, by which the lid, once in place, could be padlocked. The Water Torture Cell had a capacity of 250 gallons of water. It could be readily disassembled, for transport in four padded cases—to protect the most fragile components—and three crates.

The new escape debuted on September 21, 1912, at the Cirkus Busch in Berlin. As in the Milk Can Escape, Harry left the stage and returned in a bathing suit. His assistants had filled the cell with water. He lay on his back; and the lid was clamped onto his ankles. Then he was raised by a winch and—like a sacrificial offering, to the god of entertainment—lowered headfirst into the water.

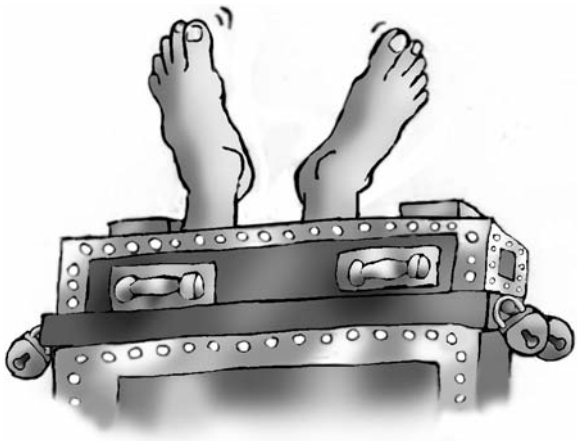
If audiences had fallen into an anxious hush upon his submergence in the Milk Can, they now froze in horror as

Harry was lowered into the Water Torture Cell—into a watery tomb! He could be seen through the glass, upside-down, his hair streaming like seaweed. Immediately, the lid was secured with padlocks; and the curtains of the cabinet were drawn. Franz Kukol stood ready with the ax. And the orchestra began to play "Asleep in the Deep," the ominous anthem of his watery escapes. The minutes ticked by.

Then the curtains parted and Harry stepped out, dripping water and gasping for breath. (The gasps were theatrical: he had escaped long before.) The lid, with its ankle-holes, was still in place and padlocked; yet somehow he had escaped from the cell. And the audience—at once mystified and relieved—applauded wildly.

From that night on, the Water Torture Cell was a sensation. Will Goldston, editor of *The Magician*—and a friend of Harry's—reported on it in his monthly column:

> Harry Houdini is appearing at the Circus Busch, Berlin. He has several times before visited Germany and is very popular there. We learn, however, that during his present engagement he has broken all his previous records in that country. The Circus Busch is packed at every performance, and his act is the talk of Berlin. He is featuring an "upside down" escape of an extraordinary character. (*The Magician*, October 1912)



After touring in Germany, Harry moved on to Britain. His initial booking was in Cardiff. With the fervor of a publicist, Goldston describes his reception there:

> It is a commonplace to say that "he was the talk of the town"; Houdini is always that whatever may be the town he is visiting. But the public interest he aroused in Cardiff appears to have been quite exceptional. "Standing room only" was the rule at every performance; and crowds assembled in the streets to cheer him as he arrived at and left the theatre. His great act was "The Water Torture Cell." The cell is filled with water; Houdini is placed in it head downwards; his ankles are clamped and locked above in the centre of a massive cover. Yet he manages to escape! The act will doubtless make a great sensation in London, where Houdini will, we understand, appear at the end of next month. (*The Magician*, January 1913)

Harry's own publicity was no less effusive. One of his posters describes the Water Torture Cell as "the greatest sensational mystery ever attempted in this or any other age." And upon returning to New York in May, he ran this ad in the *World*:

> HOUDINI
>
> The world-famous self-liberator presenting the greatest performance of his strenuous career. Liberating himself after being locked in the Water Torture Cell (Houdini's own invention) whilst standing on his head, his ankles clamped and locked in the center of the massive cover—a feat which borders on the supernatural.

In fact, there were those who believed that his escapes *were* supernatural—that nothing else could explain them—that Houdini had the ability to *dematerialize* himself. J. Hewat McKenzie, a psychic researcher, had witnessed the Milk Can Escape at a theatre in London, and offered this explanation:

> Without disturbing any of the locks, Houdini was transferred from the tank direct to the back of the stage in a dematerialized state. He was there materialized and returned to the stage front dripping with water....This startling manifestation of one of nature's profoundest miracles was probably regarded by most of the audience as a very clever trick. (*Spirit Intercourse: Its Theory and Practice*, 1917)

The Water Torture Cell was indeed a clever trick—and it reinvigorated Harry's career. Audiences marveled at it. Bookings were plentiful and well-paying. And because of the required athleticism, the inherent danger, and the cost of constructing a cell, the feat attracted few imitators.

On July 16, 1913, he performed the escape in Copenhagen, for an audience that included the Danish royal family. The next day, while meeting with the press, Harry was handed a cablegram. He opened it, learned that his mother had died, and fainted.

Theodore Roosevelt

The S. S. *Imperator* steamed through the waters of the Atlantic, bound for New York. On its bow was a bronze eagle, emblematic of the Hamburg–America Line and of imperial Germany. From the ship rose three smokestacks, trailing fumes from the coal-fired turbines, and a Marconi antenna. The world's second-largest ocean liner, the *Imperator* carried more than four thousand passengers. Many were enjoying luxury accommodations on the upper decks; others (a third of those aboard) were traveling steerage, crammed into the dungeon-like hold.

Among the passengers were the Houdinis, on their way home. It had been a difficult year for Harry. Since Cecelia's death, he had sought to recover from despondency. Gradually, the affliction was fading; yet he had been profoundly affected:

> According to Mrs. Houdini, her husband was never quite the same after his mother's death. Something of the youthful quality went out of him, something of the earlier joyousness. It had been no absentee admiration that he gave his mother; she was his most intimate friend. Her passing left a gap in his life that gave him an acute sense of loss to the end. (Kellock, *Houdini: His Life-Story*)

Returning to work had helped to alleviate the despondency. Two months after the funeral, he had opened in Nuremburg, thrilling audiences with the Water Torture Cell. After that, he had toured with the Cirkus Corty-Althoff (headlining on a bill that included Konsul Patsy, a popular chimpanzee). Then he had begun a two-month engagement in Paris. But in need of a vacation, he had cut it short, and spent a month with Bess on the Riviera—gambling, taking in the sights, trying to relax and to heal.

In January he had returned to the stage, touring the U.K. as the featured act in music halls. And in the spring, he had launched a full evening show of his own. Advertised as Houdini's Grand Magical Revue, "in which he will prove himself to be the Greatest Mystifier [or at least self-promoter!] that History chronicles," it was an hour-long presentation of illusions—without the Water Torture Cell. He had vanished Lady Godiva and her horse; performed the Miser's Dream (hundreds of coins from nowhere); and revived Metamorphosis, with Bess in her old role. But audiences (and theatre managers) had been disappointed by the lack of a sensational escape; and the Grand Magical Revue was short-lived.

Now it was June of 1914. Along with many of their countrymen, the Houdinis were returning to the U.S. Also making the crossing were a horde of emigrants. For war was imminent in Europe; and it was rumored—correctly, as it turned out—that the *Imperator* might be the last ship out of Germany. The deteriorating situation had provoked an exodus of rich and poor alike.

Among those returning home was a public figure as well-

known as Houdini—Theodore Roosevelt. During the past year the former president had explored the wilderness of Brazil, seeking the headwaters of the River of Doubt; and he had been in London to arrange the publication of his account of the exploration. The two men were much alike—manly, vigorous, driven; and they immediately struck up a friendship, taking walks together along the upper deck and chatting. One morning they were discussing spiritualism, when a ship's officer approached Houdini with a request. Would he perform as part of the entertainment that was scheduled for the first-class passengers? "Go ahead, Houdini!" urged Colonel Roosevelt (as he liked to be called). "Give us a little séance." Houdini agreed to do so.

The entertainment took place in the first-class lounge—the luxurious Grand Salon. It was still two days before the *Imperator* was due to arrive in New York; and the audience—elegant in their evening dress—welcomed the diversion and the social occasion. The ship's orchestra and a soprano offered music by Puccini. Next on the program was Houdini, who performed a medley of tricks. Then he

announced that he was going to summon the spirits. He passed out pencils, slips of paper, and envelopes to audience members, including Roosevelt. Write down a question, Houdini instructed them. And he offered suggestions, such as "Where was I last Christmas?" Seal the slip in the envelope, he said. One of the envelopes will be selected at random—and the spirits will respond to the question therein.

He went around with a hat, collecting the envelopes. But when he came to Roosevelt, he decided to honor the ex-president and allow him to submit *his* question to the spirits.

Houdini brought out a pair of double-sided slates—the kind used by both school children and mediums. He showed the slates to Roosevelt, who confirmed that all four sides were blank. Then he placed Roosevelt's envelope between the slates, along with a piece of chalk; tied the slates together; and lay them on a table.

And summoning the spirits, he asked them to answer the question in the envelope—to use the chalk to set down an answer. A hush fell upon the audience. An eerie presence seemed to have entered the Grand Salon.

Roosevelt watched the slates, trying to look like a good sport. Houdini asked him to say what was written on his slip.

"'Where was I last Christmas?'" said Roosevelt, who had used one of the suggested questions.

Houdini told him to open the slates. Roosevelt did so and gasped. Chalked on one of the slates was a map, showing his itinerary through the Brazilian wilderness. And an arrow pointed to a location on the River of Doubt—the very spot where he had camped on Christmas. Yet he had not yet published any of this information—in fact, had been keeping it secret. Seemingly, a spirit had drawn the map! For beneath it was a signature—that of W. T. Stead, a noted journalist who had perished on the Titanic. Roosevelt was stunned. It was the most amazing thing, he said, that he had ever seen.

When they met the next morning, he took Houdini aside

and asked him: "How did you do it last night? Was that real spiritualism?"

"No, Colonel," replied Houdini, "it was just hocus-pocus." But he would explain no further.

It was indeed hocus-pocus—of the most daring sort. In "Confessions of a Jail-Breaker" (1919), Houdini would finally disclose the origin of the map. It had come, not from the spirit of W. T. Stead, but from a mere mortal:

> I was about to sail from London for America, and learned at the ticket office that Colonel Roosevelt was to be a fellow-passenger, although no public announcement had been made of the fact....I foresaw the customary request from an entertainment committee of passengers for a performance from me on board ship, and I also realized the Colonel Roosevelt would be the dominating presence in the audience. I therefore resolved to work up something which would involve some recent activity of his.
>
> It so happened that he was returning at that time from his trip of exploration in South America with the announcement of the discovery of the River of Doubt. He had given—privately—a map of his explorations to a famous London newspaper and it was to be published three days after the steamer had sailed. No one, with the exception of Colonel Roosevelt and one or two others, knew the details of the map. I, therefore, determined to get a copy.

From the ticket office Houdini took a taxi to the offices of the newspaper. There he was able to procure, from a friend on the staff, a copy of the map. With this inside information, he would become a medium.

In an unpublished paper, quoted in Kellock, Houdini makes further disclosures:

> "I prepared my slates and was ready for the séance. I found it easy to work the Colonel into a state of mind so that the suggestion of the séance would come from him.
>
> "On the night of the séance I asked the passengers gen-

> erally to write questions. Then one question was to be selected by someone from half a dozen placed in a hat. I had secretly prepared half a dozen of my own, and of course I 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 a strange coincidence he asked exactly that question." (Kellock, *Houdini: His Life-Story*)

The original plan had been to have Roosevelt select an envelope from the hat; and that question—planted by Houdini—would be answered by the spirits. But having learned that the Colonel's own question was, by chance, the desired one, Houdini put the hat aside and placed Roosevelt's envelope between the slates.

And how had he learned Roosevelt's question (for which he had planned to elicit a separate response from the spirits)?

> "Here is how I got his message. The morning of the séance I noticed two books on a table in the salon. I took them into my stateroom, and with a razor blade I cut alongside the edges of the cover of each and lifted up the outer cloth binding. Below this I inserted a sheet of white paper and on top of this a carbon sheet....
>
> "At the séance I handed the Colonel a pencil and a piece of paper to write his question. As he started to write, with the paper in the palm of his hand, I exclaimed, 'I beg your pardon, Colonel,' and reached over and handed him one of the prepared books to rest his paper on....
>
> "After he had sealed the question in an envelope, I reached over and took the book from him, apparently to replace it on the table. As I did so, with my back to the audience, I tore the cover and peeked at the question. By a lucky chance it proved to be exactly the question I had prepared for."

As for the map that had appeared on the slate, Houdini

had drawn it there beforehand. But when displaying the slates, he had, through skillful manipulation, shown only the three blank sides—a standard trick of mediums.

The audience had been entertained by this ghostly visitation, and by Roosevelt's reaction to it; and word of the séance quickly spread throughout the ship. The radio operator sent an account to the Marconi station in Newfoundland. And when the *Imperator* docked in New York, the story of Houdini's mystification of Roosevelt was in all the newspapers. He had scored, as intended, a publicity coup.

Sixteen years earlier, Colonel Roosevelt had scored a similar coup. He had publicized the heroic charge of his Rough Riders at the battle of San Juan Hill and used it to further his political career. Consummate self-promoters, he and Houdini were two of a kind.

Walking through a Wall

Two weeks after returning to the U.S. (with 83 pieces of baggage!), Harry opened at Hammerstein's Roof Garden, with his own show. It was his third successive season at the theatre on Forty-second Street. Audiences were large, thanks to the newspaper stories about him and Roosevelt—and to publicity stunts. During the engagement at Hammerstein's, he twice escaped from packing crates that had been nailed shut and dropped into the East River. On the first occasion, he had been handcuffed; on the second, padlocked inside a bag.

His show featured a new illusion, the rights to which he had purchased from a magician in England. "Houdini will walk through a Brick Wall," promised ads for the show. Milbourne Christopher, in *Houdini: The Untold Story*, describes what took place on stage:

> Twice daily bricklayers built a wall nine feet high in a steel frame on a wheeled base. To allay the suspicion that trapdoors might be used, a rug was spread on the stage and over this a large square of muslin was placed. The wall,

> inspected by a committee, was then rolled into position at the center of the muslin, with one end turned toward the audience. Houdini, in a long white coat, stood to the left of the wall. A six-foot-high, threefold screen closed him in. Spectators could see the bricks above and to the sides of the screen. Another screen was set on the other side of the wall.
>
> Houdini waved his hands above his screen, shouting, "Here I am." As the hands vanished from view he added, "Now I'm gone." The screen was pulled away. No Houdini. When the other screen was opened, there stood the magician smiling enigmatically.

A review in *Billboard* was lavish in its praise of the illusion:

> Houdini, second week, gave the most remarkable performance that has ever been witnessed in American vaudeville. His opening trick is the wonder of the age. He walks through a solid brick wall without disturbing a brick. The audience sat spellbound for fully two minutes after this feat was accomplished. They were too dumbfounded to applaud.

How had this miracle been effected? The trick was simple yet ingenious. The wall was on wheels and slightly elevated, with its base a few inches above the stage. Directly beneath it, covered by the rug, was a trapdoor. An assistant under the stage opened the trapdoor, causing the rug to sag —just enough for Harry to squeeze through to the other side of the wall.

The Brick Wall illusion was a sensation. But after his stay at Hammerstein's—extended to three weeks—Harry never again performed it. For the secret of his passage had become known. Also, twenty-five minutes were necessary for the bricklayers to build the wall. For Houdini the showman, the wait was suspenseful; but for variety shows, with their fast-paced succession of acts, it was unacceptable. And finally, a legal question had arisen: the magician who had sold him the rights was being challenged by another magi-

cian, both claiming to have created the illusion.

For theatres that had no trapdoor on their stage, Harry had envisioned a different scheme. Described in a notebook, it was this: Once his assistants had placed the screen about him, he would don a smock, similar to the ones they were wearing. Thus disguised, he would slip out and mingle with the assistants. Then, as they set up the second screen, he would slip in behind it, hide the smock, and prepare to greet the audience with that enigmatic smile. In this alternative scheme, no trapdoor was required. And his traversing of the wall would be equally inexplicable—unless someone was counting the assistants.

Suspended Straitjacket Escape

As his popularity had risen, Harry Houdini had continued to attract imitators. On stage they had escaped from handcuffs, straitjackets, milk cans, and in one case—a German woman calling herself Undina—a water torture cell. Brazenly, they were also copying his publicity stunts: leaping from bridges while handcuffed, escaping from submerged crates. But on September 8, 1915, Harry debuted a new stunt—one that no one else was willing or even able to copy.

A year earlier, he had set out on a tour of the U.S. Originally, he had planned to return to England, after the engagement at Hammerstein's and a summer spent with family; contracts had already been signed. But then war had intervened, forcing him to cancel those bookings. Instead, he had signed on with both the Keith and Orpheum circuits. And it was in Kansas City that he introduced the Suspended Straitjacket Escape.

A local newspaper, the *Kansas City Post*, had allowed him to suspend himself—upside-down!—from the roof of its building. In return, Harry provided the newspaper with a headline and a story:

HOUDINI FREES SELF OF STRAIT-JACKET SUSPENDED HEAD DOWNWARD AT THE POST

5,000 See Famous Liberator Slip from Torture Garment in Free Exhibition; Experts from Police Tie Straps on Man and Watch Him Release Them.

Five thousand people, jamming Main street in front of The Kansas City Post building from curb to curb at noon today, saw Houdini, wizard of the Orpheum circuit, hanging head downward from a rope in full view of the whole crowd, escape from the best and strongest straitjacket owned by the Kansas City police department.

They saw him twist and turn at the end of the swaying rope, bend his body almost double and then with the ease of a man snapping a thread he slipped the arms of the straitjacket over his head and in twenty seconds was free.

The story continues with a detailed account of Houdini's "impossible feat." Described is his escape from "a canvas and leather contrivance that, seemingly—and in all cases but Houdini's—binds its victim hopelessly and helplessly." He had stood on the bed of a truck, the *Post* reports; and two policemen, Ike Walston and Ed Smith, had strapped him into the straitjacket, fastening it as tightly as possible.

"If you can get out of that," said Walston, giving the straps a final examination, "you can get out of anything."

"I can get out," replied Houdini, "and so easy you can scarcely believe it."

Walston and Smith laid the trussed-up magician on his back. The rope was knotted about his ankles, by a trusted assistant; and the crowd cheered as Houdini was hoisted to a height of twenty feet above the street. They gazed up in fascination as he hung there upside-down. "He began to twist and turn and contort his agile body into strange postures," reports the *Post*. Finally, he pulled the straitjacket down over his head and flung it into the crowd. A roar of acclaim greeted him as he was lowered to the street.

The policemen had been impressed by Houdini's escape from their straitjacket. They watched as his feet were untied. "There is no use trying to imprison that man," said Walston. "He could get out of a steel vault with a hairpin."

"I could do just that thing," said Houdini, overhearing the remark.

Three weeks later, in Minneapolis, he repeated the stunt —at a height of forty-five feet. Again, thousands had gathered to watch. Thereafter, Harry ceased to leap off bridges for publicity. Instead, he performed the Suspended Straitjacket Escape at every opportunity—and at even greater heights. Often, he was able to persuade a newspaper to let him use its building. The arrangement was mutually advantageous: The newspaper got an exclusive interview; and Harry received front-page coverage.

The number of spectators kept growing. In Pittsburgh a crowd of 20,000 gathered to witness his aerial escape. A reporter for the *Pittsburgh Sun*, which hosted the event, was reminded of a hanging:

> A suppressed shout came from the crowd as Houdini appeared in the doorway of the *Sun* building. Above him, like a gallows, a single beam projected from a window at the top story of the building and a rope swung clear, coiling in sinister fashion at his feet.

In Baltimore he was suspended from a downtown building —the offices of the *Baltimore Sun*—as 50,000 watched from below. Traffic had been brought to a halt. And in Washington the crowd was estimated at 100,000—comparable to that of a presidential inauguration.

Photographs of these crowds reveal them to have consisted almost entirely of men, who were drawn in large numbers to the spectacle. (Perhaps women were less avid to see someone plunge to his death.) And everyone (in an era when to be bareheaded in public was a sartorial lapse) is wearing a hat. Harry would have enjoyed a bird's-eye view of thousands of hats.

Yet not everyone in the crowd was watching him as he struggled with the straitjacket. For this throng of spectators, pressed together and distracted, offered an opportunity for pickpockets. "When he first did the trick in lower New York," says Kellock, "the police reported that more pockets were picked than on any previous occasion. While thousands of persons were staring into the air, the light-fingered gentry reaped an easy harvest."

Wartime

In April 1917 the U.S. declared war against Germany; and men were called upon to exchange their hats for helmets. Caught up in a wave of patriotism, many sought to enlist. Among them was Harry, who showed up at a recruitment center in Manhattan. Forty-three-years old, he was turned down on account of age.

So he set out to contribute in his own way—as a well-known entertainer. Incurring a significant loss of income, he cancelled his bookings for the fall season. And for eighteen months he traveled about: selling war bonds; fund-raising for the Red Cross; and entertaining at army camps.

Previously, Harry had given free shows at hospitals, orphanages, and other institutions. In Toronto he had performed at a home for the indigent. At San Quentin and Sing Sing, he had entertained the inmates with demonstrations of escapes. (Inspired by his example, a lifer successfully escaped from Sing Sing.) In Milwaukee (where as a youth he sold newspapers), he had given a show for the city's newsboys; hundreds of urchins had crowded into the Majestic Theatre. But the shows that he gave now at army camps—for soldiers about to be shipped overseas—were especially gratifying to him. Featured was a routine called Money for Nothing. Plucking five-dollar gold pieces out of the air, he tossed them to the soldiers. By the end of the war he had given away more than 1500 of these souvenirs. In addition, he had sold more than a million dollars in war

bonds. And with Jim Collins, he invented a diving suit that could be rapidly exited in an emergency. They donated the plans to the navy.

In August, a musical revue called *Cheer Up* had opened at the Hippodrome. The show was a patriotic extravaganza, intended to boost morale in wartime; and the Hippodrome, with its five thousand seats and colossal stage, was the perfect venue. Featured was a pageant called "The Land of Liberty," with George Washington and Miss Liberty; a portrayal of life in an army camp; a chorus of marching soldiers; a recreation of the New York skyline, with a troop ship sailing by; vaudeville acts; and rousing music by John Philip Sousa. *Cheer Up* was a hit.

Harry joined the show in January, with a new illusion: the Vanishing Elephant. He had purchased the rights to it from Charles Morritt, an English magician whose specialty was illusions with mirrors. An elephant was led on stage by its trainer; and Harry greeted it with a lump of sugar. Then it was led into a cabinet the size of a moving van. The doors were shut; the cabinet was rotated several times; and Harry fired a pistol. When the doors were reopened, the elephant (along with its trainer) had vanished.

Actually, it was concealed behind a mirror. But the illusion was convincing; and word of it—Houdini was making *an elephant* disappear—sold tickets. He remained with the show for four months—his longest engagement ever. Twice daily he caused the elephant to vanish. Even magicians were baffled by the effect, though they suspected a mirror. A joke among them was that it took four stagehands to roll the empty cabinet onto the stage, and a dozen to roll it off.

Soldiers were still being shipped overseas when *Cheer Up* closed in May. It was succeeded at the Hippodrome by another patriotic revue, called *Everything*, in which Harry performed the Whirlwind of Colors. He filled a glass bowl with colored liquids and covered it with a paper drumhead. Punching through the paper, he drew out a clothesline hung with national flags, which he stretched across the stage.

Then, from the folds of the American flag, he produced

a tame eagle—a living emblem of a nation at war. It perched on his shoulder, oblivious to the cheers that filled the theatre.

Charmian

Thousands had gathered at the Hippodrome to see the Vanishing Elephant, then in its third week as part of *Cheer Up*. Seated among them, in the front row, was a woman in white—white furs draped over a white outfit. Forty-six years old, Charmian London was the widow of Jack London. She was in New York to arrange for the publication of a travel book she had written; and Harry had provided her with a ticket to the show.

Two years earlier, in Oakland, Harry had befriended the Londons. He was appearing at the Orpheum; and Jack and Charmian had come to his dressing room after the show, introduced themselves, and taken him out to dinner. The next night they all went out again for dinner, this time with Bess joining them. And on the third night, the Houdinis hosted a dinner in their hotel room. The couples got along well and promised to get together again in the future.

Had they done so, the friendship would doubtlessly have flourished. For Harry Houdini and Jack London were kindred spirits. Both were self-educated, manly, energetic, ambitious; and both were talented artists who had risen from modest circumstances to wealth and celebrity. Each of them had known hardship in his early years: Jack as a sailor,

prospector, and factory worker; Harry as an itinerant performer. And each was indomitable. A friend said of Jack: "He gave the feeling of a terrible and unconquerable physical force." The same could be said of Harry, with his escapes.

Their wives, however, were dissimilar. Bess had grown up in Brooklyn, one of ten children in a strict, Catholic family. Like her immigrant parents, she was superstitious. ("My own entire family believed in ghosts, witches, and the power of the evil eye, and lived in a constant dread of supernatural evils.") At sixteen she had rebelled against her conservative upbringing and become a showgirl. And at eighteen, after a brief acquaintance, she had married Harry—a Jewish magician!

Charmian, on the other hand, had found no need to rebel, having been raised in a progressive household. Homeschooled in California by an aunt who was a poet, feminist, vegetarian, spiritualist, socialist, reformer, and believer in "free love," she was the recipient at an early age of a free-thinking bonanza—a complete set of enlightened views. In her twenties she had put them into practice, joining a coterie of bohemians in San Francisco. Unconventional and unabashed, she had become a New Woman, as it was called.

In *Jack London: An American Life*, Earle Labor offers this portrait of her:

> Charmian...was a real-life prototype of the New Woman: intelligent but not supercilious, athletic but nonetheless feminine, self-possessed but not arrogant, brave but not foolhardy, cultured but free-spirited, sexually discriminating but uninhibited. Beyond exemplifying all these qualities, she was gifted with an elusive charm that drew men to her.

One of those drawn was Jack London, the best-selling author of *Call of the Wild* and a fellow free-thinker. London was twenty-six years old (five years her junior) and already married, with two children. But the marriage was not a

happy one; and in 1904 he divorced his wife and wed Charmian. Deeply in love, they embarked upon an active life together: operating a ranch near San Francisco; riding about in the hills (both were accomplished equestrians); touring the South Pacific in a sailboat; socializing (and embracing Socialism) with their bohemian friends. In accordance with their progressive beliefs, the marriage was egalitarian (unlike that of the Houdinis, in which the Master of Mysteries was the master too of his wife).

All the while Jack was hard at work—even aboard the sailboat—producing his daily quota of a thousand words. By 1916 he had published dozens of books and become the highest-paid author in America. And he was enjoying his fame and fortune—when, at the age of forty, he died of a kidney ailment. Charmian was devastated.

She continued to live on the ranch, but also to travel and write books of her own. While in New York to work with an editor, she recalled those dinners with Houdini. "Charming Houdini," she had written at the time in her diary. "Shall never forget him." Nor, as it turned out, did he forget her. When she got in touch with him, he invited her to the show. Thus did she come to be seated among the audience at the Hippodrome, watching him make an elephant disappear.

A week later she attended the show again. Soon thereafter, the two met and began an affair.

Only with the publication of *Houdini!!!: The Career of Ehrich Weiss* (1996), a biography by Kenneth Silverman, did the existence of their affair become known. Silverman had examined Charmian's diaries, which were preserved in the Huntington Library in California, and discovered a series of tell-tale entries. Although brief and elliptical, they provided evidence of a liaison.

In them, Charmian—described by Silverman as "liberated, vivacious, and seductive"—tells of exchanging notes and phone calls with Houdini, who dubbed her the Woman in White. During one call, he made a "declaration" that "rather shakes me up." Finally, he visited her at the apart-

ment in Greenwich Village where she was staying. As they chatted, he touched her hand and remarked that she was trembling.

They met repeatedly over a period of several weeks. On one occasion, writes Charmian, he "stirred me to the deeps." On another, he gushed: "'You are gorgeous—you are wonderful. I love you.'" And on yet another, he declared: "'I'm mad about you. I give *all* of myself to you.'" The Magic Man, as she calls him, had become her lover.

The affair began in mid-February; within a month, it had run its course. Houdini would promise a visit, but fail to show up. "Expect HH," she notes in the diary, "but no word." Like his elephant, the magician had disappeared. Perhaps he was feeling guilt at his betrayal of Bess—his longtime companion who had taken that oath of loyalty to him on the bridge at Coney Island. Or perhaps the spirit of Rabbi Weiss had appeared at night and rebuked him for the sin of infidelity. "Whatever his motives in the amour," says Silverman, "the moralistic Houdini seems to have cringed at what he was doing."

In April Charmian returned to California. And while she and Houdini would exchange greetings over the years, never again did they meet.

Brownstone

Soon after their return to the U.S. in 1914, Harry and Bess had moved out of the brownstone in Harlem and put it up for lease. They had not lived there since Cecilia's death, the year before; and her lingering presence—the memories that the rooms evoked; the depression in her favorite chair; her empty bed—was unsettling to Harry. So the Houdinis had moved in with Dash and his family, sharing a house in Brooklyn.

But four years later, during *Cheer Up*, they moved back into the brownstone. Harry's book collection had continued to grow and could no longer be accommodated at the

Brooklyn house—it took four moving vans to transport it. Moreover, tensions seem to have developed between the two households. (Brought on perhaps by the books!)

The brownstone was located at 278 W. 113th Street, in a neighborhood favored by prosperous Germans and Jews. It was a three-story rowhouse, with high-ceilinged rooms, fourteen closets, meandering passageways, and a dumbwaiter. In the basement were Harry's workshop, exercise equipment, and an outsized bathtub in which he practiced holding his breath. Originally, his mother and sister Gladys had occupied rooms in the house; and his brother Leo, a radiologist, had set up a medical practice in the parlor. But the sole occupants now were the Houdinis and a servant.

Books filled the brownstone, like the accumulation of a hoarder. Visitors entered via a foyer whose chandelier was an antique Egyptian lamp, converted to electricity. On display in the foyer were rare books; the wands of famous magicians; a cup presented to Houdini by Grand Duke Sergius of Russia; a bust of Houdini. This entryway led into a larger room that was also filled with books and mementos.

During the postwar years, Harry welcomed frequent visitors to "278," as he referred to the brownstone. Coming to see him were a steady stream of relatives, fellow magicians, showmen, booksellers, reporters. When not on tour, he was always available to discuss business or to talk about himself. And among those who came to interview him were Emanuel and Marcet Haldeman-Julius.*

Emanuel Haldeman-Julius was a unique figure in American publishing. The son of a bookbinder, and a fervent socialist, he had purchased—with funds from his wife's inheritance—the printing facilities of a moribund newspaper in Kansas. Using excerpts from classic works that were unprotected by copyright, he began to publish the Little Blue Books (initially called the People's Pocket

* The couple were among the first Americans to combine their surnames into a hyphenated mouthful. She had begun life as Marcet Haldeman; he, as Emanuel Julius (from Zolajefsky).

Series). These pamphlets were slightly larger than a playing card; printed on cheap paper; and staple-bound with a blue cover. Their authors were Voltaire, Emerson, Balzac, Hawthorne, Darwin, Thomas Paine, and other literary, philosophical, and scientific luminaries to whom no payment was due. Lurid titles were sometimes affixed to these excerpts. ("A Lustful King Enjoys Himself" was a potboiler by Shakespeare.)

Eventually, Haldeman-Julius also published original works, with titles such as "Hypnotism Made Plain." The Little Blue Books cost a nickel; and by the time of his death in 1951, hundreds of millions had been sold. They were a pocket university—a resource for the self-educated. A factory worker could keep one in his pocket and read it during his lunch break. Haldeman-Julius claimed that he had "done more to bring education to the masses than any other individual since the invention of printing." ("The masses"—that appalling term used by socialist intellectuals to denote the teeming objects of their paternalism.) A newspaper called him "the Henry Ford of literature."*

He also published a magazine called *Haldeman-Julius Monthly* (later renamed *The Debunker*); and he and Marcet had come to interview Houdini for a profile. They had been drawn by the magician's skeptical views on Spiritualism and mediums. Arriving at the brownstone, they were greeted by a secretary, who led them inside. In an article titled "An Interview with Harry Houdini," Marcet describes the visit:

> "What a collector!" murmured E. H.-J. and just then the little lady reappeared to say that Mr. Houdini was now ready to see us.
>
> Up first one flight of stairs and then up a second one, we

* Among those whom he helped to educate was Selma Danaceau, my maternal grandmother. A Russian immigrant, she read Little Blue Books in place of attending college. And she promoted my own self-education, taking me when I was fourteen to get a library card and to visit a bookstore.

climbed to the third floor. There at the front end of the hall we entered a study in which the glorious disorder plainly proclaimed that it was a practical workshop. I had a confused impression of a long substantial table piled high; of all sorts of papers, boxes, filing cases; of more papers, boxes, filing cases. From a smaller, almost hole-like nook, just the sort in which a writer loves to nestle, Houdini, saying goodbye to one visitor, arose to greet us with a cordiality as convincing as it was gracious.

Dressed, according to the season, in light trousers, with shirt open at the throat and sleeves cut off at the elbows, he evidently had been hard at work earlier in the evening. He is not a large man and, as he himself will frankly tell you, not a particularly young one, but he is well built, and so full of energy and enthusiasm that it is simply impossible to ticket and pigeonhole him in terms of years....For two hours, in this tiny den, study, office, whatever one chooses to call it, seated before his huge, much battered, well-used desk, with every inch of space—or so it seemed to me—covered with books, papers or pamphlets, Houdini and E. H.-J. talked while I listened, for the most part quietly, intent on what I heard and above all on this most volatile and challenging of individuals.

Finally, Houdini led the couple downstairs, served them ice cream and cake, and bid them adieu.

Once more in the car E. H.-J. and I found that our dominant impression was that of a tremendous, tireless worker. Here it was a warm August night and instead of loafing, Houdini was being interviewed, planning the details of his show (reading proof, too, I think he said, before he could retire), discussing possible future Little Blue Books, giving of himself freely, all the while sincerely interested, as we all are, in our common sport—debunking.

"Yes," said E. H.-J., "the man is an artist. He's a worker. He's a splendid, fearless fellow and he has brains. He is a man of real importance—is Harry Houdini."

Collector

Harry's bibliomania had begun in Paris, during his two months as a headliner at the Olympia Theatre, in the fall of 1901. He and Bess had rented an apartment—"a little home of our own," as he would remember it—at 32 rue de Bellefond in the Ninth Arrondissement. In his free time Harry had strolled about the city; and inevitably he was drawn to the *bouquinistes*—the booksellers with stalls along the banks of the Seine. The bouquinistes purveyed secondhand books. Browsing through their wares, he had purchased some antiquarian items that related to conjuring—the beginnings of his collection.

Henry Ridgeley Evans, a historian of magic who knew him years later, describes the mania that came to possess Harry:

> The ambition of his life is to write an encyclopedia of magic, giving the biographies of conjurers, accounts of their tricks and illusions, etc. With this laudable end in view, he has collected an immense amount of interesting and curious data, old programmes, play bills, prints and photographs, to say nothing of books on the magic art. He has accomplished more toward compiling data for a comprehensive history of necromancy that any man I ever met. As to his ability as a collector there can be no shadow of doubt. His books represent about twenty years of research, and a great expenditure of money and time. They were gathered from every quarter of Great Britain and the Continent, where Houdini played. The bouquinistes of the Quai Voltaire, Paris, wonder at him. The proprietors of second-hand book stores and obscure print shops welcome him with open arms. Many of his engravings, photographs, and mezzo-tints can not be duplicated, and were bought from private collectors. (*The Old and the New Magic*)

While on tour, Harry was always searching for additions to his collection. The collection was a hungry master, and

would eventually contain more than 15,000 books and pamphlets, and an estimated 30,000 prints, posters, and other miscellany. "When I have come to a town," he told an interviewer, "the police have tried to show me that their shackles could hold me, and have failed; the booksellers had tried to sell me many books, and have succeeded." Anything he could find that related to conjuring, he purchased. The core of his collection were books—in English, French, Italian, and German—about magicians and their art. But he also sought out playbills, posters, handbills, photographs, newspaper clippings, and the scrapbooks of his predecessors.

Milbourne Christopher, a latter-day magician, collector, and historian, would lament:

> Not once but many times in 1936 and 1937, then later during the war years, I visited old book and print shops in England and on the Continent only to be told that another collector of magic had stripped their shelves of all material relating to conjuring. My prompt question as to the magician's name invariably brought the reply, "Houdini."

As he searched for such material, Harry found himself becoming more eclectic. The scope of his collection expanded, as he bought works about drama, spiritualism, psychic science. He acquired the letters of famous men; the diary of David Garrick (unknown even to the actor's biographers); Martin Luther's personal Bible (with marginal notations); Edgar Allan Poe's portable desk; apparatus that had belonged to notable magicians. When other collections came up for sale, such as Evanion's, he purchased them. He acquired the files of a defunct opera house: decades of theatrical correspondence. And when Strobridge Lithograph, the chief printer of magic and circus posters, went out of business in 1919, he bought their entire stock. A truckful of posters—three tons of historic lithographs, tied in bundles—were delivered to the brownstone and carried into the basement. "Now that you have them," asked Bess,

watching from a front window, "what are you going to do with them?"

But his most gratifying acquisition were the Hebrew books that had belonged to his father. During the family's years of poverty in New York, Rabbi Weiss had been forced to sell his books to another rabbi. Harry bought them back.

The bulk of the collection was housed in the third-floor library, adjacent to Harry's study. This was his lair, says Christopher:

> Another attractive woman Mrs. Houdini might have coped with, but she had a more formidable rival in his library. When he was in New York Houdini spent more and more of his time at his book-filled desk, lost for hours on end in the enchanting exploits of the great wizards of the past.

The cataloging of the collection fell to his personal secretary. For years that position was occupied by John Sargent, a former magician. Sargent was also responsible for editing Harry's literary output—he "whipped it into shape," Bess told Kellock. (Actually, he was more or less a ghostwriter.) When Sargent died in 1920, he was succeeded by an elderly scholar-librarian named Alfred Becks. Becks had curated the Theatre Collection at Harvard. Harry describes him as "a well-bred, courteous gentleman" and "an acknowledged authority on the literature of the stage." (Becks also had a fund of scandalous tales about show-folk that he enjoyed passing on.)

Alfred Becks moved into the brownstone, reports Kellock, and became a member of the household:

> While with Houdini, save for his sleeping-hours in a small bedroom of the Houdini house, Becks literally lived in the library. Promptly at nine each morning, he would enter the library dressed in a suit of Houdini's old clothes. His meals were served to him there, as he negotiated stairs with difficulty....He never quit the library before nine in the evening.

Harry too spent many hours amid his collection; and the two men became close friends. When Becks died in 1925, Harry spoke briefly at the funeral. Then he returned home, sat at his desk, and wept.

Films

While appearing in *Everything* at the Hippodrome, Harry had launched himself upon an additional career: that of a movie star. At a studio in Yonkers, he had begun filming a fifteen-episode serial titled *The Master Mystery*. Released in January 1919, it featured Harry as an undercover agent for the Justice Department. He is investigating a criminal cartel led by Q the Automaton—a robot seemingly fashioned by a cartoonist and a tinsmith. Each episode presents Harry with a new predicament, from which he extricates himself by applying his skills as an escape artist. In the final episode Q is defeated—and unmasked. He is not a robot after all, it turns out, but a master criminal disguised as one!

This showcase for his escapist talents was the first of five films in which Harry would star. With titles like *Terror Island* and *Haldane of the Secret Service*, each was a melodrama in which a succession of deadly perils and physical restraints test his resourcefulness. But the Houdini films were only moderately successful. The problem was that the escapes were not compelling. Although he actually performed them—in real time for the camera—audiences suspected that cinematic trickery was involved.

In addition to his work as a screen actor, he was still performing on stage. And in January of 1920, Harry, Bess, Jim Collins, Jim Vickery, and Franz Kukol (who had changed his name to Frank Williamson) sailed to England aboard the *Mauretania*. Harry had a twenty-week contract with the Moss chain of theatres—a contract he had entered into before the war, but was only now able to honor. From February through June he toured the U.K.; and audiences were as enthusiastic as ever.

It was during this tour that Harry became friends with a well-known author. Though ending in acrimony, his friendship with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle would significantly alter the course of his career.

(to be continued)

Larry Weeks

In a fifth-floor apartment in Brooklyn lived Larry Weeks, a retired juggler. Weeks was ninety-four years old, and had occupied this apartment for nearly seventy years. During that time he had pursued a successful career as an entertainer. And he had collected memorabilia—posters, playbills, paraphernalia, photographs, films—relating to magicians and jugglers. His apartment had become a treasure-trove, brimming with these relics.

Among his acquisitions were scores of Houdini items. Weeks (who described himself as "Houdini's biggest fan") owned one of the magician's scrapbooks; his shaving mug; a bookshelf from his house; handcuffs, shackles, and other props. Over the years Weeks had assembled an impressive collection of Houdiniana. And its crown jewel was a silent film—one that had long been considered lost. For Weeks owned, and zealously guarded, the sole surviving copy of *The Grim Game*—Houdini's first, and best, feature film.

Besides the memorabilia, Weeks had memories. When he was five, he had seen Houdini perform. When he was nine, he had taught himself to juggle, after attending a vaudeville show in which a juggler explained the technique. By the time he was in high school, Weeks was juggling in local clubs. In 1937, while a student at Brooklyn College, he had won the Inter-Collegiate Baton Twirling Championship. Finally, he had embarked upon a professional career, with an act he called "Juggling for Fun."

Then, in 1942, Weeks enlisted in the army. He received training as a cryptographer. But amazingly, he would spend the war as a juggler. While stationed at Fort Monmouth, he juggled in camp shows; and attending the show one day was Irving Berlin, the songwriter. To boost public morale, the military had commissioned Berlin to create a musical revue about army life. The cast and crew were to consist entirely

of actual soldiers; and Berlin was visiting bases in search of men who had been actors, singers, dancers, musicians, or stagehands in civilian life.

Among those whom he selected for his show was Pvt. Larry Weeks, whose juggling had impressed him. Weeks and hundreds of others were transferred to a special company at Camp Upton (where Berlin had created a similar show during World War I). And rehearsals soon began.

This Is the Army was a musical tribute to the men of the armed forces. A rousing extravaganza, it included singing (nineteen new songs by Berlin), dancing, comedy, acrobatics, magic tricks, female impersonation, and, alas, a minstrel sketch. But there was also a tap-dancing number with genuine African Americans. At Berlin's insistence the company was integrated—the only such company in the army. And Berlin himself came on stage and sang "O! How I Hate to Get up in the Morning" (a popular tune from that earlier show).

Weeks played a soldier on kitchen duty. Dutifully, he peeled potatoes. But when the sergeant wasn't looking, he would juggle them. And in a tour de force, he juggled two potatoes and an apple—repeatedly taking bites of the apple, until only its core remained. He also juggled eggbeaters and performed a rifle drill with a mop. A seasoned entertainer, he made it all look easy.

This Is the Army opened on July 4, 1942, at the Broadway Theatre in New York. It was both a critical and box-office success. "The best show of the generation," declared the drama critic for the *New York Times*. In October the company—359 soldiers, plus Irving Berlin—went on tour, playing to full houses in cities from Washington (President Roosevelt was in the audience) to San Francisco.

The company then traveled to Los Angeles, to make a film version of the show. Housed in tents on the Warner Brothers lot, the men donned their uniforms each morning and marched to work in formation. (Military discipline had remained part of their daily regimen.) "We used our talents as actors and as soldiers, so when we marched, we were the

smartest-looking outfit you ever saw," a trombone player would recall. The film too was a hit. "Buoyant, captivating....amid its hurly-burly humor, its sentimentality, its riotous shenanigans, it has caught the American pulse," said the *Times*. The film's considerable earnings, like those of the stage show, were contributed to a soldier relief fund. Originally, the company had been scheduled to disband after the filming, with the soldiers returning to their combat units. But it was decided that the show would go on to Great Britain. Berlin added a song called "My British Buddy." Boarding a troop ship, this theatrical troupe crossed the Atlantic, crammed in with soldiers bound for the front lines.

This Is the Army was enthusiastically received in London. On opening night at the Palladium, the king and queen came backstage to commend the cast. And after touring the provinces, the show once again had its life extended—on orders from General Eisenhower, who had recognized its value as a morale booster.

So the men—as close-knit by now as any troupe of performers—continued on to Italy, Egypt, Iran, India, New Guinea (a Broadway show in the jungle!), the Philippines,

and tiny islands in the South Pacific. They were playing now to soldiers, at opera houses, movie theatres, outdoor amphitheaters, or whatever venues were available. In the Pacific they sailed from island to island, initially aboard a decrepit Dutch freighter, later on a leased cruise ship. (Near the Admiralty Islands, the freighter drew the attention of a Japanese submarine; but it was deemed harmless and left alone.) The venues on these islands were primitive. That trombone player recalls: "The stage crew would set up the stage, which was usually at the bottom of a hill. The theatre was a hill. Guys just sat on the ground. We would get audiences of 10,000, 15,000. Iwo Jima, Okinawa, the Marianas, the Marshalls, we went to all of them." Military morale still needed a boost; and *This Is the Army* was providing it.

Finally, in October 1945, the company was dissolved. Larry Weeks had been with the show for three-and-a-half years. He had spent the war juggling potatoes, instead of tossing grenades. Upon receiving his discharge papers, he returned to Brooklyn; moved into an apartment at 456 Brooklyn Avenue; and resumed the career that had been interrupted by the war.

For the next twenty years he made a living as a juggler. Vaudeville was in its final days; but Weeks juggled in the remaining theatres (usually on the same bill as a movie). Accompanied by music, he juggled in nightclubs—on television—in two Broadway shows—in an ice show, while skating. Sometimes included in his act were balancing feats, baton twirling, magic tricks, or tap dancing.

In a promotional notice he bills himself as "Mr. Speed ...the act everyone enjoys," and describes the range of his offerings: "Chinese sky ribbons, Indian clubs, giant Indian clubs, Swiss flag throwing, fruit and vegetables in the air, comedy ball juggling, dual electric batons flash in the dark, bouncing putty." (For the last he used balls of Silly Putty—first juggling them, then squashing the balls together, elongating the result, and jumping rope with it.) "Never a dull moment," he promises.

Keeping these objects in the air was a challenge, even for

Larry Weeks. Eventually, he retired from juggling and turned to other pursuits—a variety of activities that he juggled with apparent ease. He edited the newsletter of the International Jugglers Association, of which he was president. He ran an agency that booked entertainers for children's shows. He founded a company that manufactured props for magicians. (Among his inventions was a seamless sponge ball.) He participated in the annual Houdini Seance, at which an attempt was made to contact Houdini's spirit. And from 1966 to 1979, he produced the Big Apple Magic Convention. Held four times a year, this popular event featured lectures, film clips, a roomful of vendors, and a full-length vaudeville show.

Meanwhile, he continued to expand his collection of memorabilia. It included the type of devices used by escape artists such as Houdini. Weeks describes this portion of his collection as "over 400 different types and styles of handcuffs, legirons, thumbcuffs, finger-cuffs, oregon boots, metal mitts, nippers, twisters, come-alongs, and all sorts of shackles, manacles, gyves, and other prison and hospital restraints from all parts of the world."

In addition to hosting the Big Apple Magic Convention, Weeks became a familiar figure at similar gatherings. And he helped promote what was called the New Vaudeville: young performers who sought to re-create the old shows and ambience. He enjoyed socializing with magicians and other artists, who would often visit him in his apartment. Held in esteem by these visitors, he reminisced, offered advice, and showed off his memorabilia. There was a projector in the apartment; and occasionally, he would screen for his guests that sole surviving copy of *The Grim Game*.

In his later years Weeks had a scraggly beard that lent him the air of a recluse. Yet he was no such thing. Nor had his juggling skills diminished. The editor of *Genii*, the magic journal, describes an encounter with him:

> I saw him in the dealer room at a collector's convention. He wandered away from his own dealer table because he was

> curious about some juggling clubs that were on another table. Without touching them, he began to tell me all about how they would "behave" and why when someone juggled them. Then he picked up the clubs and we went into the hallway, and he started juggling with them—really well. He explained why they were poorly made, and how the center of gravity was in the wrong place because they wanted to pull away from him. Considering his age, his agility at 85 with the clubs was shocking.

When he was ninety, his friends organized a birthday party for him, at a magic shop in Manhattan. "The place was abuzz with plenty of nostalgic chatting," reports one attendee. "Larry was in fine form and astonishing condition for a man his age—lucid and lively."

•

Rick Schmidlin, a film preservationist, was sitting with Dick Brookz and Dorothy Dietrich, proprietors of the Houdini Museum in Scranton, Pennsylvania, on the patio of their museum, when Brookz mentioned *The Grim Game*. Widely believed to be a lost film, in fact it still existed, he assured Schmidlin. For he and Dietrich had twice attended showings of it, at the Brooklyn apartment of an elderly friend. This friend owned a surviving copy—apparently the *only* surviving copy—and might be willing to part with it, if offered enough money. Dietrich described the film as "one of the most sought after items...the Holy Grail of Houdini history."*

* As a notable work of art of which only a single copy existed, *The Grim Game* was in good company. *Beowulf* was written by an Anglo-Saxon poet during the reign of King Cnut. A transcription of the original was made in the scriptorium at Malmesbury Abbey; and that manuscript wound up in the library of Sir Robert Cotton, an antiquarian, where it was damaged in a fire. Finally, in 1815, an Icelandic scholar published a transcription of its text, along with a Latin translation. The manuscript is now in the

Schmidlin was immediately interested; for lost films were his specialty. He had already "reconstructed," for TCM (Turner Classic Movies), two of them: Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* and Tod Browning's *London After Midnight*. Using still photos taken on the sets, and guided by the original scripts, he had created storyboard versions of these films. But the prospect of *finding* a lost film—of recovering a classic of the silent cinema—aroused in him sentiments familiar to treasure-hunters, archeologists, and fictional detectives. He wanted to know more; but Brookz would not reveal the friend's identity.

A few days later, Brookz received an e-mail from Schmidlin. The preservationist had contacted an executive at TCM; impressed upon him the importance of the Houdini film; and told him that a copy had possibly been discovered. Schmidlin was excited. "Give me more information," he urged Brookz. "TCM may be interested.

Weeks later, Brookz telephoned Schmidlin. He had spoken with that friend in Brooklyn, he said, and had informed him that TCM might be interested in acquiring his copy of *The Grim Game*. The friend was willing to discuss the matter. His name was Larry Weeks. Call him, said Brookz—and he gave Schmidlin the phone number.

British Library. Without it, *Beowulf* would have been lost.

Nosferatu, the classic vampire film, is another example. Filmed in Germany and released in 1922, it was an adaptation of the novel *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. But the filmmakers had failed to secure permission from Stoker's widow. She successfully sued for copyright infringement; and the court ordered that every print of *Nosferatu*, along with the negative, be destroyed. According to Jonathan Bailey on his website *Plagiarism Today*: "The court's order was followed with amazing thoroughness. All prints of the movie were destroyed, that is, save one. One print found its way to the United States. Since *Dracula* was already in the public domain there, there was no way to have a U.S. court order its destruction. It is from that print that every copy of the film existing today was made."

Schmidlin called Weeks, identifying himself as a film preservationist who represented TCM. A conversation ensued that was short on communication—Weeks was hard of hearing, and kept asking how much money he was being offered. (The sum had yet to be negotiated.) But finally a day and time were agreed upon for a meeting.

Schmidlin flew to New York and checked into a hotel. The next day he took a cab to 456 Brooklyn Avenue; climbed five flights of stairs; and knocked on the door at 5G.

The door was opened by Weeks, who led him into the apartment and offered him a seat. The apartment was filled with memorabilia—a museum with a curator-in-residence. A nurse was present; she was taking care of Weeks since a recent hospitalization. Schmidlin looked at him and braced for a challenge. With his veteran's cap, tangle of a beard, and wary look, Weeks resembled an old-time prospector, guarding his claim against interlopers—a ninety-four-year-old geezer who was not to be trifled with.

Yet the retired juggler was cordial. For an hour and a half he and Schmidlin talked—with no mention of the film or a deal. Both men understood a basic rule of negotiation: initially, no mention is to be made of the issue at hand. Weeks talked about Irving Berlin, the wartime show, juggling. He showed Schmidlin a brochure for his act. He pointed out, amidst the accumulation of memorabilia, Houdini's shaving mug. And he talked about his friendship with Dick Brookz, whom he had known for years: as a teenager, Brookz had attended his Big Apple Magic Convention.

While friendly, Weeks was clearly suspicious—distrustful of this "film preservationist," and of the television network that he represented. As a former entertainer, Weeks knew the ways of the industry. He had something valuable to sell; and TCM wanted to purchase it for as little as possible. But he was determined not to be taken advantage of.

A turning point came when Schmidlin mentioned Zinn Arthur, a Hollywood photographer with whom he had been friendly. Weeks too had known Arthur, who had been a singer with *This Is the Army*; and suddenly there was a

bond. In an interview Schmidlin describes the moment:

> Larry lit up like a Christmas tree. All the magic connections, studios, everything else were just like, "Okay, I've heard it before." But here I know somebody that was from his past....And that was the key. I was a buddy of a buddy of his, and that made me good.*

Weeks was ready now to talk business. He led Schmidlin over to a pair of film cans. Affixed to one of them was a label, identifying the contents as "POSSIBLY THE GRIM GAME." Until a few days ago, explained Weeks, the cans had been stored in a closet, buried beneath other cans. A friend had come over and dug them out.

Schmidlin opened the cans. In one of them was a large reel containing a 16mm print; in the other, two smaller reels with a negative. But was it *The Grim Game*? Carefully, he began to unspool the print and examine it.

The film, he discovered, had not been rewound: its final sequence was outermost on the reel. That sequence was famous; for it had been featured in the original publicity, and copies of it had survived. It showed two airplanes colliding in mid-air—and dangling from one of them was Houdini. (Actually, it was a stuntman taking his place; but Houdini took the credit.) The collision was real—it had not been intended. But the pilots and stuntman survived; and the shot was used. Unspooling the film, Schmidlin examined these frames. "And that was when I had the moment where it was like, okay, yes, this is the film." *The Grim Game* had been found.

> After that, Larry and I went through everything—the kind of money we're talking—and agreed to get together after I talked to the studio. He was excited and he almost didn't

* Schmidlin was interviewed in 2015 by the editor of *Wild About Harry*, a website about Houdini. That interview was my main source for the story of the film's acquisition.

> want me to leave....He said, "Don't you want to project the film?" I told him I had to arrange for a facility. We didn't want to put it on his little projector and just run it. So I said I would be back. And he said, "You promise?" And I said, "Yes." And that was how we left it. He stood by his little door after about four hours and waved.

The idea of running the film on a home projector, and possibly damaging it, had horrified Schmidlin. He was soon making arrangements to bring it into the Preservation and Conservation Department, at the library of New York University, and examine it there. Then he called TCM; reported that the film was indeed *The Grim Game*; and received approval for the offer he had made. He asked TCM to prepare a simple bill of sale. A standard ten-page contract, he warned, might scare the owner off. Finally, he telephoned Weeks and arranged to meet with him and close the deal.

But two days before their scheduled meeting, Weeks called to say that he was back in the hospital—and that he didn't know if he'd be getting out. Yet not only the state of his health was troubling him. "He was completely worried that somebody else would claim credit for something that he had found and that he had kept safe all these years. That was his biggest fear at that point."

Several weeks went by. Then Weeks was released from the hospital. He was back home, he reported, and was ready to sign.

Once again Schmidlin traveled to Brooklyn; climbed the five flights of stairs; knocked on the door; and, the bill of sale in hand, entered the apartment. Weeks was still being looked after by the nurse. Promised payment within forty-eight hours, he signed the papers—despite repeated warnings from the nurse: "They're going to make millions of dollars off of you!"

A few days later, a limousine—provided by TCM—pulled up in front of the apartment building. The nurse helped Weeks into the backseat. Schmidlin sat in the front,

with the film cans in his lap. He had found a lost film—an event that "for people in my field...happens maybe once in a lifetime."

The limousine took them to the library, for an initial viewing of the film. The Preservation and Conservation Department was located in the depths of the building. Weeks, Schmidlin, and the nurse joined staff members at a flatbed editing machine. Also present was Viv, a young woman whom Weeks had insisted be invited to the viewing. Viv was a Harvard graduate who had become a juggler and clown on the streets of New York. Discovering that Larry Weeks was still alive, and eager to learn from a master, she had acquired him as a mentor.

First, a conservator cleaned the print and inspected it for tears. Then they viewed it on the flatbed. "There were jitters and this and that," recalls Schmidlin, "but the whole film was there. And that's when we knew we had a remarkable thing." The sole surviving copy of *The Grim Game* was intact. And the lengthy process of digitization and restoration was about to begin.

That *The Grim Game* had survived was due to the efforts of Larry Weeks. In 1947 he had acquired, from the Houdini estate, a 35mm print of the film. The print was already deteriorating. Moreover, it was on nitrate stock, which was highly flammable. By 1959 its condition had become critical. So he had it transferred into a 16mm negative; and a new print was struck from that. The original print was probably discarded.

The transfer had taken place barely in time. It was evident to the conservators, from tell-tale signs, that the 35mm print would have started to decompose within a year. And the 16mm print was on its way to a similar fate. It was already showing signs of "vinegar syndrome"; and in five years or so, they said, it would become a sticky mass of celluloid. As for the negative—those reels in the second can—not only was it decomposing, but half of it was missing.

The restoration, by Schmidlin and others, took six months to complete. A score was composed. And on March 29, 2014, a gala premiere was held at Grauman's Egyptian Theatre in Los Angeles. Silent movie fans and Houdini enthusiasts filled the theatre, eager to see the legendary showman in action.

Houdini did not let them down. *The Grim Game* was an old-fashioned melodrama, in which his character—a journalist who has been framed for a murder—frees himself from one restraint after another. He escapes from handcuffs, a prison cell, a straitjacket, a lunatic asylum, a bear-trap—each escape being woven into the plot. The film told a story; but it was also a showcase for his abilities as an escape artist. At the time of its release in 1919, Houdini had said:

> The present generation can see me in person, but I want my most thrilling feats perpetuated on the screen, so people in later years can assure themselves that I actually did them. That's why I have saved the most sensational stunts I have ever done for this picture and have worked my head off to make them as successful as possible.

Nearly a century later, the guests at the Egyptian Theatre were duly thrilled by his stunts. (They may have been unaware that the most sensational of them—the dangling from an airplane—had been done by a stuntman.) Moreover, they were impressed by Houdini's acting ability; by his portrayal of an ordinary man with extraordinary skills; and by the production values of his first feature. Houdini had returned from the grave—not to give assurances of an afterlife, but to provide evidence of his feats.

TCM had promised to fly Weeks out to Los Angeles for the premiere. As the rescuer and longtime keeper of the film, he would have been the guest of honor. But Larry Weeks had to be acknowledged in absentia. For he died while the film was still being restored.

He was buried at Machpelah Cemetery in Queens. His grave was just a few hundred yards from Houdini's; as an act of homage to his idol, he had purchased the nearest plot available. A rabbi conducted the graveside service. A bugler, with a military honor guard, played taps—for a veteran who had gone to war as a juggler. And a magician performed the Broken Wand ceremony.

Martin Sunshine

David Meyer, a collector in Illinois, had purchased an assortment of magic books from a fellow collector named Tigner. Included in the sale was a scrapbook—a blue binder labeled "Martin Sunshine." It was filled with newspaper clippings, programs, contracts, and photographs, from various periods of Sunshine's career as a magician. The oldest item was a program from 1924, for a dinner at which he had performed. Also, Tigner had added two items: an obituary for Sunshine, from *Genii* magazine (October 1978); and a copy of a letter that Tigner had sent to a man in California. Accompanying the scrapbook was an audiocassette.

In "A Glimpse at Martin Sunshine" (*The Linking Ring*, March 1998), Meyer describes the contents of the scrapbook. He also transcribes what he found on the cassette: an interview with Sunshine. It had been conducted at Sunshine's home in Wisconsin, two years before his death. Preserved on tape were the recollections of a long-time, if little-known, magician.

Martin Sunshine had worked hard to accumulate those memories. Over a span of fifty years he had performed in a variety of venues: theatres, nightclubs, banquet halls, cruise ships. Originally, he had a mindreading act, with his wife Betty. Blindfolded, she would identify—via a secret code—objects handed to him as he circulated in the audience. Betty told a reporter:

> "It took us four years to make the second sight act foolproof. The record I'm proudest of is identifying 153 objects in 11 minutes. Yes, I can call Greek emblems and repeat foreign phrases, even though I don't know what they mean. Distance is no barrier. We've done the act by phone, with me miles from the objects." (*Pittsburgh Press*, January 28, 1933)

In addition, they had a routine called the Golem Automaton, in which Betty, hidden inside the automaton, operated it.

For several years Sunshine was co-owner of the Broadway Magic Shop in Times Square. He invented some tricks of his own, and is said to have originated the Center Tear—a technique for peeking at messages that are written on folded pieces of paper. More likely, he learned the Center Tear from a fraudulent medium. And he is known to have been involved with one such medium—Frank Decker.

Decker was a regular customer at the magic shop. And on one occasion, Sunshine sold him a trick, then acted as a confederate during its employment at a séance. George LaFollette, an investigator of mediums, describes the affair:

> Sunshine and Decker became friends and quite confidential. One day Decker bought a mail bag escape with bar [a breakaway bar for the locks] with the understanding that Sunshine would assist in a sensational presentation of the trick at one of Decker's private seances. The seance was held December 8, 1932 and during its course Sunshine arose and challenged Decker to escape from the mail bag in a trance. The challenge was accepted. Decker went into a trance, was placed in the bag which was sealed and locked. The lights were pulled out and in a few seconds went on again and Decker lay on the floor out of the bag with the seals and locks still unbroken. The gathering was amazed, for Patsy, Decker's spirit guide, had released him. (*The Linking Ring*, January 1956)

How had this release been accomplished? The spirit guide had dematerialized the bag, then rematerialized it—with Decker now on the outside of the bag. Or so the spirit claimed, speaking through Decker. And later in the evening, Decker put his arms under Sunshine's arms and levitated him (after having whispered for him to jump into the air). Sunshine came to regret his participation in these deceptions, which got him into trouble with the Society of

American Magicians.

Martin and Betty Sunshine had continued to perform their mindreading act. But their minds seem to have fallen out of sync; for the marriage came to an end. And in 1939, Sunshine began working solo, calling himself "Kismet the Magician." He became the house magician at a resort in Wisconsin. It was an engagement that would resume each summer for the next thirty-five years—with one hiatus. In 1943 Kismet shed his fez, donned a uniform, and went off to war—as a magician. He made multiple tours, in the South Pacific, entertaining soldiers at USO clubs.

In the taped interview Sunshine talks about his experiences during the war. Towards the end of the interview, he offers to locate some clippings about the mindreading act. The interviewer perks up.

> "You mean you have a scrapbook with these things?"
> "I've got seventeen scrapbooks!"
> "You do!"

> "Oh boy, you should see the stuff in those scrapbooks. You should see some of the pictures I got in the South Pacific when I was there. I had to wear a uniform."

Seventeen scrapbooks! But Tigner had acquired only the one. In 1980, he told Meyer, he had placed an ad in a newspaper for antique collectors. It said that The Friends of Magic History—a group whose bulletin he edited—were interested in purchasing items related to magic.

Soon thereafter, a parcel arrived at his doorstep. Inside was the scrapbook. It had been sent by a man in California, who wanted no payment—just safekeeping for an artifact of magic history.

Tigner wrote back, thanking him for the scrapbook and asking how he had acquired it. Had he known Sunshine personally?

The man responded that he knew nothing further about the magician. As for his acquisition of the scrapbook, he had found it in a trash barrel. How it came to be there is not known. Nor is the fate of those other scrapbooks.

Kismet the Magician was fated to be forgotten. But for thirty-five years he had amazed and amused the visitors to a summer resort.

Lung Tung

Visitors to Peking during the 1920s tell of an elderly magician who performed in hotel lobbies. Lung Tung, as he was known, had become a tourist attraction. He might be found at the Grand Hôtel de Pekin, or at the Grand Hôtel des Wagons-Lits, entertaining guests. As they watched in fascination, Lung Tung—picturesque in his traditional garb—performed close-up magic. He cut a length of rope into pieces, then restored it with a flourish. From beneath a frayed cloth—as ancient-looking as the

conjurer himself—he produced bowls of water. With a proficiency that age had not diminished, he did the Linking Rings.

During his performance Lung Tung did not keep silent. Instead, as each trick reached its climax, he would chant: *"Lung Tung—Lung Tung—Iga Lung Tung."* Then, a moment later, in a more subdued voice: *"Dui Dui—Dui Dui—Iga Dui Dui."*

It was from this chant that Lung Tung had acquired his name—the moniker by which he was known to tourists. But what did the words signify? They were assumed to be a nonsensical refrain—an incantation akin to "Abracadabra!" or "Hocus-pocus!" But in fact they had a specific, and poignant, meaning. For they were a vestige of his glory years, as Court Magician to the Empress of China.

Until her death in 1908, the Empress (as imperious as her contemporary in the West, Queen Victoria) had ruled the Middle Kingdom. Perched on the Dragon Throne, she had presided over an elaborate court; resisted the rising call for reform; and survived the intrigues of family members, ambitious ministers, and devious eunuchs. She had also enjoyed a variety of entertainments. Among them were the performances of her Court Magician.

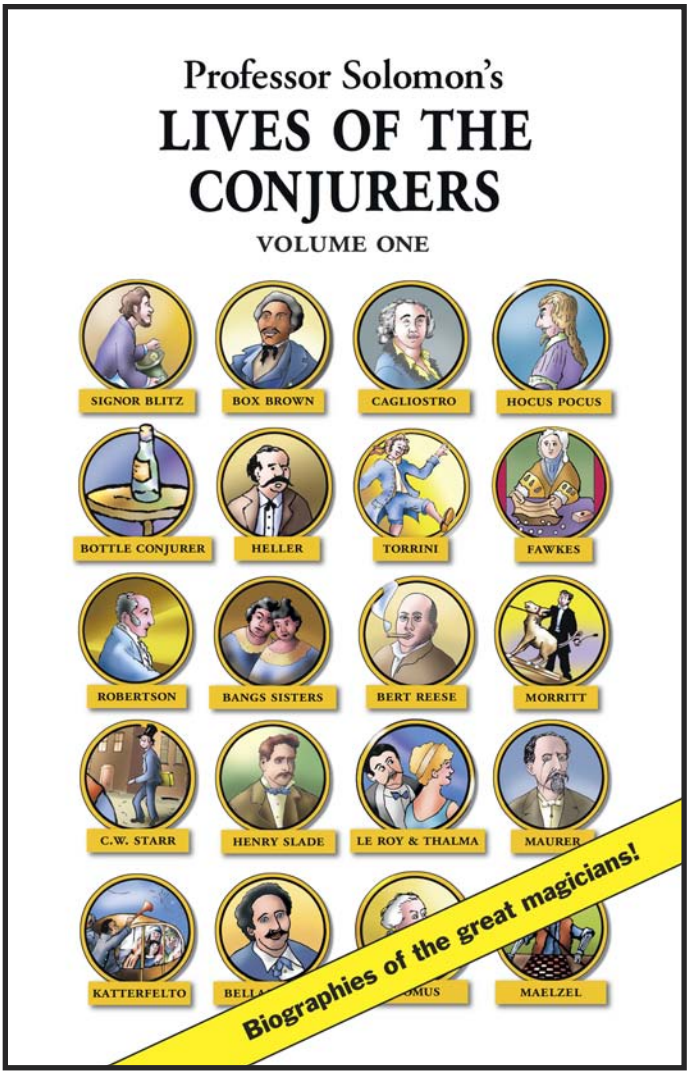
John Mulholland, the historian of magic, describes these performances:

> The old Chinese magic show was a thing of pomp and ceremony. There was no jazzy "The more you watch the less you see" introduction to an effect. Detail by detail the magic would be built until, just before the rope was to be rejoined or the largest bowl produced, the maker of magic would chant: "Strike the gong—strike the gong—once [*Lung Tung—Lung Tung—Iga Lung Tung*]." From the background the gong bearer would respond: "It shall be struck—it shall be struck—once [*Dui Dui—Dui Dui—Iga Dui Dui*]," and the gong would boom out. That made a miracle of sorts rather than a performance of hanky-panky. (*Quicker Than the Eye*, 1930)

But three years after the death of the Empress, the Ch'ing Dynasty was overthrown; and a republic was declared. The imperial court was dissolved. His skills were of no use to the new government; and the Court Magician was let go.

Thus did Lung Tung, as he became known, wind up entertaining in hotel lobbies. His magic was less elaborate than before. Nor could the elderly magician (who was passing a hat for donations) afford an assistant. So a gong was no longer struck at the climactic moment of a trick.

Lung Tung, bound by tradition, still chanted the old words. But gone was that reverberating ring—that celestial sound that had lent an air of true mystery to his tricks.



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