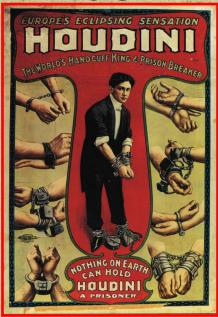
HOW DID HOUDINI DO IT?



How did he walk through walls, escape drowning, and shatter iron chains that were tightly wrapped around him?

The rare photos in this book might help you figure it out. So might the exclusive update about the rumor that Houdini was poisoned. But just remember, a true magician never reveals his tricks. . . .



"An entertaining ride."
—Publishers Weekly (starred review)

"Pure magic."

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

A Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book

ALA Best Book for Young Adults

Publishers Weekly Best Book

School Library Journal Best Book



A Greenwillow Book

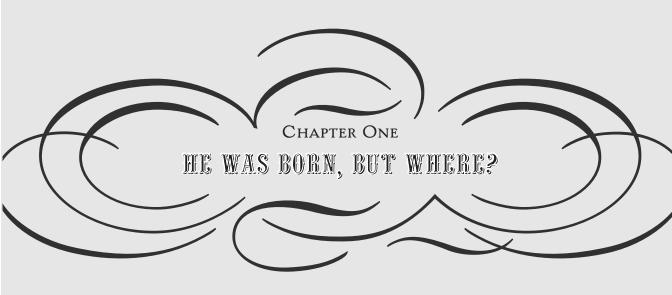
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ot long ago the Breast Pocket snipped from a man's pajamas came up for auction in New York City. Immediately, bids around the room erupted like doves flushed from cover. So eager was the crowd for this fragment of sleepwear that a lofty price of \$3,910 was reached before the auctioneer banged his hammer and shouted, "Sold!"

Why would anyone want the pocket of an old pair of striped pajamas with the initials **HH** monogrammed in gray?

Easy. The first initial stood for Harry. The second for Houdini.

Harry Houdini, the world's greatest magician and escape artist.

No jail cell, no chains, no manacles could hold the man.

Houdini, who walked through a red-brick wall! He came through without a scratch, too.

Houdini, who clapped his hands like cymbals and made a five-ton Asian elephant disappear into thin air. Not even the elephant knew how he did it.

Like those engaged in the ancient commerce in relics of saints, buying and selling a wrist bone here, a great toe there, today's magic collectors seek anything associated with the supernova of sorcery, the incomparable, the fabled Houdini—even a trivial scrap of flannel.

This powerfully built but diminutive young man was the most commanding wizard to burst upon the world scene since Merlin performed his parlor tricks during the misty days of King Arthur. Houdini could have sawed Merlin in half.

An abject failure as a magician in his early twenties, Houdini woke one morning, like the poet Lord Byron, to find himself famous.

A knockabout kid, the son of an impoverished rabbi, he insisted that he was born in Appleton, Wisconsin. An ambitious finger flinger, he crowned himself King of Cards, with holes in his socks. Leaping onto a carousel horse at full gallop, he reached for the

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gold ring of stardom—and caught it. That, perhaps, was his greatest sleight-of-hand trick, as we shall see.

What exactly did he do that so excited the world's imagination? What razzle-dazzle fixed the name Houdini in the public memory so firmly that it is still remembered today, more than eighty years after his final disappearing act?

Watch him.

Tightly strapped and buckled into a canvas straitjacket designed to restrain the violently insane, he is being raised by his ankles to dangle like a fish from the cornice of a tall building. He wriggles free as adroitly as a moth emerges from a cocoon. The crowd cheers. Can nothing hold the great escape artist?

After recrowning himself the "King of Handcuffs," a defiant Houdini is being shackled at the wrists and ankles. He is quickly nailed inside a wooden packing case and thrown into the untidy waters of New York Harbor. Moments later, he splashes to the surface, rattling aloft the police jewelry.

He has escaped the inescapable. The skeptics are befuddled. The man must have supernatural powers!

Equally confounding is his trademark Indian Needle Trick.

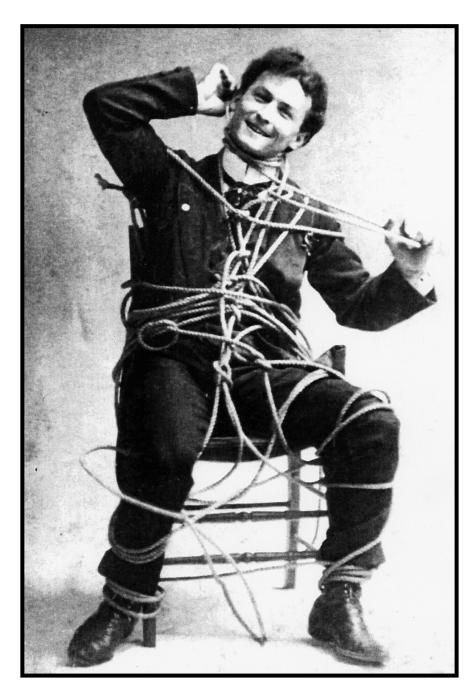
Apparently swallowing thread and 100 to 150 sewing needles, he extracts the needles from his lips to dangle and flash in the spotlight—each one threaded! Impossible!

Was the devil at work here? Does it need to be said that anyone who lacks the secret of trying to thread needles with the tonsils had better first make a reservation at the nearest emergency room? As a devout magician, I am able to reveal only that I may *not* reveal Houdini's secrets.

Just as nature abhors a vacuum, a gap in the logical mind needs to be filled. Forgetting that magic tricks are designed to defy logic, the dumbfounded rush in with nonsensical explanations to plug the vacuum. As Houdini's fame expanded, so did the absurdities.

If Houdini wasn't in league with Old Splitfoot, perhaps he could shrink himself like a cheap suit of clothes, to allow chains and handcuffs to drop off. Even better, maybe he could dematerialize himself like so much fog to slip through the bars of a jail. So insisted Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes stories.

These "exposés" were harmless enough, and Houdini must have smiled to himself, for he knew how his tricks were *really* done.



Houdini doing what he did best—laughing at restraints.

At the same time, the faux secrets were demeaning, for they dismissed the magician's hard-won sleight-of-hand skills and mastery of the arts of fooling the socks off people. Houdini was the grand guru of magic. He didn't need the unseen assistance of sprites, spirits, and imps.

It is said that you know you are truly famous when the deranged imagine that they are you.

Once Houdini's exploits blazed across newspaper headlines, the opportunists, the cunning, the nutcases, and the jealous emerged like theatrical chameleons. The imitators not only parted their hair in the middle, as did the escape artist, they mimicked his style of dress and his billing. There were more self-crowned Kings of Handcuffs before the footlights than in all the royal houses of Europe—half a hundred in England alone. To Harry's great annoyance, these pests tried to counterfeit his name, coming up with such worshipful thefts as Whodini, Oudini, and Hardini.

Women, too, tried to get into the act. Most nettlesome was a Miss Undina in Germany whose name, when pronounced, sounded close to the original. He had to sue to get her and her copycat tricks out of the escape business. And where a heavily

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manacled Houdini had had himself photographed in his underwear, an imitator named Miss Lincoln had herself photographed in a racy costume that could pass as knee-length bloomers. But not even the curves and black stockings of that distaff queen of handcuffs were a match for Harry's commanding footlight razzmatazz.

His strategy was to trump his imitators with ever more daring and death-defying feats of mystification. It was this battle for supremacy that inspired one of his most dangerous illusions—the awesome Milk Can Escape.

In earlier days, milk fresh from the cow was transported in large cans. Houdini had one made just large enough to hold him tightly folded in a fetal position. Buckets of water were poured into the can, followed by Houdini himself. Challenging his audience to hold its breath with him, the great showman lowered his head under water. The lid was secured with six padlocks, and a curtain was drawn around this impending death scene.

At thirty seconds the audience was gasping for breath. Sixty seconds passed. *Tick, tick, tick.* Two minutes! Had the escape gone wrong? *Tick, tick, tick, tick.* Was Houdini drowning?

Assistants with axes stood ready to burst open the death can. At the last moment, just short of 180 seconds, out popped the master of escape, breathless, dripping wet, but very much alive.

HE JESTS AT HANDCUFFS shouted a Los Angeles newspaper, while Houdini challenged the world to duplicate his escapes. But as the years passed, he could read his voluminous scrapbooks, and they were telling him that flinging off handcuffs was no longer making headlines.

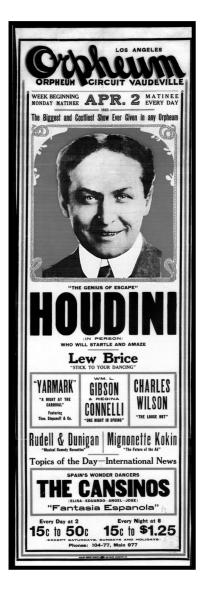
While his name had become as recognizable as that of Napoleon, of Shakespeare, of Lincoln, the former carnival magician feared slipping back into obscurity. He understood that fame needed constant renewal, and he went at it with ingenuity and furious energy.

He took up flying in a canvas airplane that looked like a box kite. He became the first aviator to conquer the air in Australia. This not only made headlines, it put him in the history books.

He became a movie star, using his skills at sleight of hand and escape to foil the villains. In one film scene, he frees himself from barbed wire! In another he is weighted with a ball and chain and thrown into water. He lives to tell about it.



Houdini in Winnipeg, Canada, about to escape from a tightly strapped straitjacket. A penciled note on the back of this photo says that the temperature was flirting around thirty degrees below zero.



Houdini, once a bottom-of-the-playbill vaudeville performer, rose quickly to the top. Here he is in the I920s, on a bill with Spanish dancers. One of the Cansinos would grow up to become the movie star Rita Hayworth.

For a long time he had been cocking a skeptical eye at the trendy public embrace of Spiritualism. This hoax busied itself within dark chat rooms where the believers attempted to talk to the dead.

But the ghosts had quirky ways of communicating. Sometimes they made rapping sounds to spell out their messages. They might lift heavy tables to let believers know they were on the premises. That must have been quite a feat for a ghost with no more substance than a warm breeze. At other times the spectral voices would come pouring forth from brass trumpets. They even came whistling out of the spouts of teakettles! The real wonder is that these magic stunts were taken seriously. Didn't the innocents know that talking trumpets and teakettles could be bought at any conjuring shop? And why would the dear departed resort to such daffy goings-on?

Houdini immediately launched a crusade to expose the bald-faced trickeries. The spirit mediums who were fleecing the gullible fought back, of course, but once again Houdini was in the head-lines. He nested there, the most talked-about American in America, until his sudden death on Halloween night in 1926.

The cosmic whimsy of that night of the goblins couldn't have

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been lost on him during his final hours. He'd come so far in a short life from those humble beginnings in Appleton, Wisconsin. If, indeed, that's where he was born.

Harry, you pulled a trick on us. That's not where you were born. Some snoop dug up your birth certificate. The masquerade is over.