

# HOUDINI MASTER OF ILLUSION

---

*Bro. William E. Parker is a Past Grand Senior Warden of the French National Grand Lodge in Paris. He is a prolific Masonic writer whose articles have been printed in numerous Masonic publications. -Editor*

As the famed magician was shackled and then lowered upside down into the water-filled Chinese Torture Cell, gazing through the glass front illusion at the immersed man, the audience sat transfixed knowing that unless escape was possible within precious minutes certain death by drowning would result.

His very name conjures up visions of magical miracles, thrilling escapes, death defying stunts and a mysterious persona capable of the impossible. While he died three quarters of a century ago, the average person still thinks of Houdini when asked to name a famous magician. What aura of greatness, mystique, and depth of charisma encompassed this man, rising from humble beginnings to the rarified pinnacle of glory, to have left such an indelible imprint on the pages of history.

In truth, there were two Houdinis; the performer as the world saw him, and Eric Weiss the man and Freemason, a personality obscured from view by the public persona. Born Erich Weiss in Budapest on March 24, 1874 [the usually cited date is April 6 of that year in Appleton, Wisconsin, the date his mother had claimed]. If the date and location have been the subject of confusion, recent research clearly indicates the Budapest origin.

Circumstances surrounding the family's departure for America remain cloudy, although anti-Semitism undoubtedly played a major role. Harry Houdini was a complex personality, a romantic ever willing to embellish his rather mundane and plain beginnings. Throughout his life, there are clear instances where he invented and/or "embroidered" events to enhance both his personal and professional image, having an incessant need to "color" events that there might be an aura of mystery and glamour involved.

With Hungarian friends in Appleton, Houdini's father had accepted a Rabbi's position there. Unfortunately, being old world conservative, he was unable to adapt to more liberal American ideas and the family relocated, first to Milwaukee, and then to New York. The family always in need of money, young Eric took a variety of odd jobs to help out. With virtually no formal education, he left home at age 12 to "make his fortune" but after a year or two eventually relocated to New York where his family now lived.

At age 17, he was captivated by the memoirs of the great French magician Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin and it's perhaps not surprising he was drawn to what he believed to be the glamorous world of entertainment and magic where he might find fame and fortune. He was so impressed by Houdin's life that when a stage name became necessary he simply added an "i" to Houdin becoming Houdini.

Houdini and his brother Theo began a magic act playing grubby beer halls, lodge banquets, dime museums and any other bookings they could obtain, but the early years were a struggle. In the famous Coney Island, N.Y. amusement park, for example, they worked for coins thrown into a hat and in the 1892 Chicago World Columbia Exposition, Harry gave 20 shows daily at a sideshow for \$12 a week. During his early years, working carnivals and similar venues, he gained a world of information and experience in show business.

As an adult, Houdini was somewhat shorter than average, about 5'4", with blue eyes, dark curly hair and with a rather careless appearance, yet his face seemed to project a burning handsome intensity. Immensely strong both in mind and body, through exercise and balanced living, he developed his physical state to an amazing degree of fitness with literally muscles of steel and a determination of mind to match. An outstanding swimmer, he also

developed an extended underwater breath control technique which, together with his superb physical condition, would prove so essential in later years as an escape artist.

Different versions surround Houdini's meeting of and marriage to Wilhelminia Beatrice Rahner, or "Bess," and separating fact from fiction, like much of Houdini's life, is a difficult task. What is certain is that the Houdinis always celebrated June 22, 1894, as their anniversary. A match between rigidly Catholic and Jewish families might seem improbable, but it proved both successful and enduring for the Houdinis.

After the marriage, Bess replaced Theo in the act becoming the principal assistant. Success was still a fleeting entity, however, and they continued working traditional areas such as sideshows, circuses, beer halls, etc., often working ten to twenty shows daily. At one point, in Nova Scotia in 1896, with no funds left for a room, they were forced to sleep in a hallway and Houdini even considered giving up show business.

It was in 1895, looking for something different from other entertainers, that he thought of a challenge to local police stations on his ability to escape from their handcuffs and jail cells. By 1898-99, primarily as a result of these successful escapes, his reputation began to spread, better bookings followed, and after years of struggle things began looking up.

Then, booked into a large vaudeville circuit by an important impresario, the turning point arrived. Big-time vaudeville was then the most popular form of entertainment, the fledgling motion picture industry not yet the phenomenon it would eventually become. For the Houdinis, it was their "breakthrough" and an end to one-night stands and burlesque days.

Houdini spent years learning the mechanics of locks and handcuffs until he was one of the world's experts in the field. A master of opening secure devices of all types, he possessed a skill the likes of which has not been seen since and likely never will again. Additionally, Houdini had an amazing ability and brought charisma and sheer magnetism to his presentations, mesmerizing audiences until they "believed" in his miracles, a rare talent indeed.

There was also the publicity he created to enhance his image. He developed not only into a performer of unsurpassed ability, he could almost be said to be the creator of the modern "hard sell" so extravagant were his methods and claims. The great showman Barnum touted his circus acts-Houdini touted himself. It's possible no greater exponent of self exploitation and advertising has ever lived. If "Chutzpah" were a marketable commodity, Houdini would have been worth billions!

The French conjurer Robert-Houdin wrote: "A magician is not a juggler. He is an actor playing a role---the role of a sorcerer." Houdini played the role to magnificent perfection. So baffling were his methods considered, some even attributed his legendary escapes to occult or supernatural powers. No less a respected individual than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle believed Houdini had the power to dematerialize himself in one place and reappear in another.

If a modest success was being achieved, it was not yet total success for Houdini. Thus, in 1900 he and Bess sailed for England where other American magicians had done well, a gesture of immense confidence since he had no English bookings. London was not initially a "pearl" in his oyster. However, through perseverance, a bit of luck, an escape from Scotland Yard's cuffs and a trial appearance at London's famed Alhambra Theater he was on his way.

In time and with helpful publicity, successful engagements followed in France, Holland, Germany and Russia and he and Bess would spend the next five years enjoying their European success. As his fame grew, he broke all existing attendance records in city after city becoming the most outstanding, sought after, and highest paid

vaudeville entertainer on the Continent and British Isles. His ego was of monstrous proportions, however, suffering few imitators. He had "arrived" and believed he was the best!

As a consequence, he was fiercely jealous, not only of any contemporaries who also performed escapes, but indeed competitors of any kind. Through the years, he devoted much time and effort "fighting" against those who either "attacked" his act or who he felt debased the escape art through the use of trick or "gaffed" items quietly failing to mention his own use of similar hidden methods. Needless to say, he garnered tremendous publicity in the process.

Amazingly generous and thoughtful of retired or destitute magicians or their families, he carried his largess to such measures he often paid their rent or otherwise extended aid. He also gave benefit performances at charity hospitals and orphanages. His generosity, while often kept in the shadows, was legion. Possibly he felt he, too, would someday be in need, possibly he was simply implementing the Masonic tenets of Brotherly Love, Relief and Charity, or perhaps it was a bit of both.

The Houdinis never had a home life or settled down in the conventional sense of the word, spending much of their life "on the road" performing at one venue or another, their residence a series of rooming houses and hotels. Their life was the theater, the circus, or wherever they happened to be performing. While he bought a twenty-six room New York townhouse and moved his mother there, it was little more than a storehouse of magic and a place he occasionally visited.

The years were rolling by and Houdini realized he could not always dangle upside down high above the ground freeing himself from a strait jacket. He needed new worlds to conquer and so in 1919 he moved into movies, first in a "cliff-hanger" serial and then "cliff-hanger" feature films. He would invariably be chained, roped, or otherwise immobilized by villains in sequences which required his imminent release to escape death and rescue the heroine from an equally perilous situation. Needless to say, he always prevailed.

WW-I naturally put a stop to his European appearances and fiercely patriotic he tried to enlist in 1917 but at age 43 was rejected as being too old. Not to be derailed, for the next two years he performed at military benefits, canteens and training camps usually at his own expense, often working with stars such as Will Rogers, Tom Mix, and Jim Corbett. Also active in selling "Liberty Bonds," he chalked up sales of \$1,000,000 virtually single handedly.

Interestingly, while he later began to expose spiritual charlatans, he had himself followed the same path and had given psychic presentations early in his career, spiritualism then in vogue. In time, he became embarrassed at the gullibility of his audiences and revised the act to emphasize magic and escapes rather than spiritualism. Could mediums communicate with the Netherworld? While keeping an open mind on the subject, he developed a total aversion to psychic fraud, spending years both studying and lecturing on the issue and became a fervent crusader in exposing fraudulent mediums.

A member of the Craft, Houdini was not alone among Masonic magicians, a group which included such notables as Harry Keller, Howard Thurston, and Harry Blackstone. Initiated in St. Cecile Lodge, N.Y., July 17, 1923, he was Passed and Raised July 31 and August 21 and in 1924 he entered the Consistory. Immensely proud of his Masonic affiliation, he gave a benefit performance for the Valley of New York, filling the 4,000 seat Scottish Rite Cathedral and raising thousands of dollars for needy Masons. In October 1926, just weeks prior to his untimely death, he became a Shriner in N.Y.'s Mecca Temple.

On October 22, 1926, during an engagement at the Princess Theater in Montreal, a first-year college student asked permission to test the entertainer's abdominal muscle control and strike the magician, a part of Houdini's act. Houdini, accepting the challenge, mumbled his assent, whereupon the student struck before the necessary

muscles could be tensed, obviously a critical requirement. Houdini ignored later stomach pains in the tradition of "the show must go on."

Arriving in Detroit the next day, he was diagnosed with acute appendicitis but again insisted on performing. Finally, with a temperature of 104, he was taken to Grace Hospital where a ruptured gangrenous appendix was removed but peritonitis had unfortunately set in. Despite medical predictions of imminent death, his strong will to live was such he held on almost a week, finally succumbing the afternoon of October 31, 1926, at the age of 52, Halloween Day. Perhaps a symbolically magical date for his final curtain.

His body was taken to New York with funeral services held at the W. 43rd St. Elks Lodge Ballroom with some 2,000 in attendance. The impressive service included eulogies by Rabbis, a Broken Wand Ceremony by the Society of American Magicians, tributes from the National Vaudeville Artists and Jewish Theatrical Guild, rites by the Mt. Zion Congregation, the Elks, and Masonic Rites by St. Cecile Lodge. Burial was then in Machpelah Cemetery, Brooklyn, a site Houdini had personally selected.

The Literary Digest called Houdini "the greatest necromancer of the age-perhaps of all time." Be that as it may, before Houdini died he said he would send a message to his wife from beyond the grave if it were possible. Many seance attempts have been made to bring Houdini's spirit back but none have succeeded.

In the Middle Ages, Houdini would likely have been burned at the stake by the Church as being a "sorcerer" in the same manner Protestants were burned, charged by the Church as being "heretics." By the beginning of the 20th Century, however, history had moved on and in today's world the magical arts enjoy unprecedented prestige.

There is little doubt Houdini presented his "death defying" escapes in a dazzling manner, one peculiar to his own personality and to the era in which he lived. He was, after all, a showman first and foremost, a product of a particular era, an era ready to "believe," and perhaps in some respects an era unworldly and naive by comparison with today's technological wonders.

As Sherlock Holmes said: "We reach. We grasp. And what is left in our hands at the end? A shadow." Sometimes, however, in lieu of fading, the shadow endures and becomes an all pervasive reminder of a unique figure whose larger than life persona lingers on. Houdini's shadow not only endures, but his name has entered into the hallowed realm of legend.

[back to top](#)