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Houdini was, possibly, the most important single person to the idea of celebrity in the 20th century. He made his living as a magician, but more than that, he made his living as the most escape artist. He lied for a living. He understood the value of mass media when there was barely any out there. Houdini was a star in stage magic, despite many saying that he wasn't a great magician, and most important of all, when you say Houdini in the US today, people still know what you mean.

And it's that sign that I've always latched on to.

This issue was brought about because of that painting on the cover. That's on display at the Anderson Collection at Stanford, and when I saw it, it all came rushing back to me. We did an issue of *Exhibition Hall* that dealt with Houdini, but time, she has moved on! T

The painting that led to this issue is named *Houdini Challenged* and it's from 1990. The painter is the amazing Deborah Oropallo, whose works take elements of pop culture and text and combines them into very powerful images. Here, it's all about Houdini appearing to be bound, a second canvas and I believe that there's actual rope collaged on top. The image invokes all sorts of images, of bondage, of imprisonment, of capture. The reality of the bindings, their clarity, is much greater, stronger, than the image of Houdini. The visibility of the ropes and belting makes it less an homage to the image of Houdini, but to the fact that his ties are the star. Couldn't that be said of Houdini's stardom? He would make a show of the strapping, of being belted in, and that served to take the attention off of what he was really trying to do. It's a super-smart painting.

OK, what else is goin' on?

We're going to WorldCon! Vanessa and I are going to Dublin! We're staying a little bit off from the Con hotels, but we're in the middle of the Museum district, which will likely take up a fair chunk of our visit. I want to go to the Irish Modern Art Museum and the National Gallery and on and on and on!

Honestly, I'm most looking forward to the food. One of the closest places is a Mexican restaurant. I will try it. I liked the one I ate at in London, so who knows!

There's an Indian place and a Thai place too! Gluten-Free can be a difficult thing in Ireland, I've been told, so a Thai place and an Indian joint is good news!

Been doing a lot of Oral Histories for work, most recently with Chip Morningstar, who I've known for ages! I've got a few others I want to do, including Laurie Anderson, though she's much harder to go through to than Mark Mothersbaugh was!

As for my podcasts, I launched a new one! It's called *Engineers & Enthusiasts* and it's all about the first 25 or so years of Computers in the Arts. The first episode was about CSIRAC, Australia's first electronic computer and probably the first computer to ever play music.

So, what's next? The Drink Tank has an issue on *Stranger Things*, and then one on *Hamilton*, and later in the year, the excellent Doug Berry comes to play for an issue on the *Queen of Cities: Istanbul*. Journey Planet has *The Matrix*, and then there'll be two *Claims Departments*— L.A. and one that will kinda shock you.

OK, on to Houdini!!!



**Behold the Man!**

**Houdini the Physical Specimin**

There were many bodybuilder types in the first half of the Twentieth Century. There were some famous ones, Eugene Sandow, The Solid Man William Muldoon was aging but still built. Wrestler Georg Hackenschmidt looked like one of the roided-up stars of the 1980s. Lionel Strongfort managed to turn his physique into a long acting career. There was an obsession with physical culture in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Why? SCIENCE!

You see, people were starting to learn about the various things like diet and exercise and how they affected health, and there were monsters to take advantage of that! Kellogg, Post, and various other ran sanitariums for fun and profit. Well... for profit. Strong men, especially Sandow, were huge stars of early Edison actualities and later newreels. They drew big crowds to Broadway for Zeigfeld. The earliest bodybuilding competitions were hosted early in the 1900s.

It was the films that made Houdini a massive star. Yes, he was a big deal before he ever appeared on film, but once Newsreels began covering his escapes, he became a megastar. Part of the reason was his physique.

Now, magicians and escape artists have always been a pretty well-muscled bunch. It makes sense, no? The actual act of escaping is a great work-out for muscles, plus the ability to hold your breath, to break bonds, to position yourself in ways that allow the escapes.

Plus, muscles have always caught the eye.

It is no surprise that Houdini's escapes often featured him in little to no clothing. It makes sense because it would appear that there was no chicanery. The fact is it would be downright impossible to do many of his escapes in clothing, even if they could far more easily conceal the gimmicks he'd need. Part of his appeal was how skimpy his outfits were. If you look at the most famous images of his escapes. He was in little more than a speedo. That was an important aspect, as he was a hunk, and he had a physique that would not seem out of place with wrestlers, like Hackenschmidt, or boxers like Jack Johnson and Jack Dempsey, who were both friends of Houdini's. He wasn't ripped, but he was solid, not bulky, but firm. He was WAY into training, and was a member of at least one athletic club, the Pastime Athletic Club. He was a runner as a young man, which is a great way to develop your wind, allowing you to hold your breath. Harry ran his entire life, and boxed a little, and I believe studied early forms of Judo and Karate. He wrestled, and boxed a little, as many members of those late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century athletic clubs would.

He was competitive, and Joseph Rinn, who knew Houdini back when he was still Ehrich Weiss, wrote about his running –

“I joined the Pastime Athletic Club, which had grounds at Sixty-seventh Street and the East River, where I quickly developed as a runner. I became captain of the club and was its champion sprint runner in 1889, when a new member joined by the name of Ehrich Weiss, who later became famous as Harry Houdini, the magician and escape artist.

As Weiss was ambitious to win a running prize, he turned to me as captain for advice, and under my instruction he trained and won his first prize.”

Legendary Sports writer Archie MacMillan nated about Houdini's talent at running through mashland -

“In 1892, Houdini set a record for run-ning around Central Park. He was the great-est swamp-runner

that ever represented any athletic club, and it was great fun for him to start out of a Sunday afternoon and lead a pack of young hopefuls across the morass that at that time stretched across the northern end of Manhattan Island.”

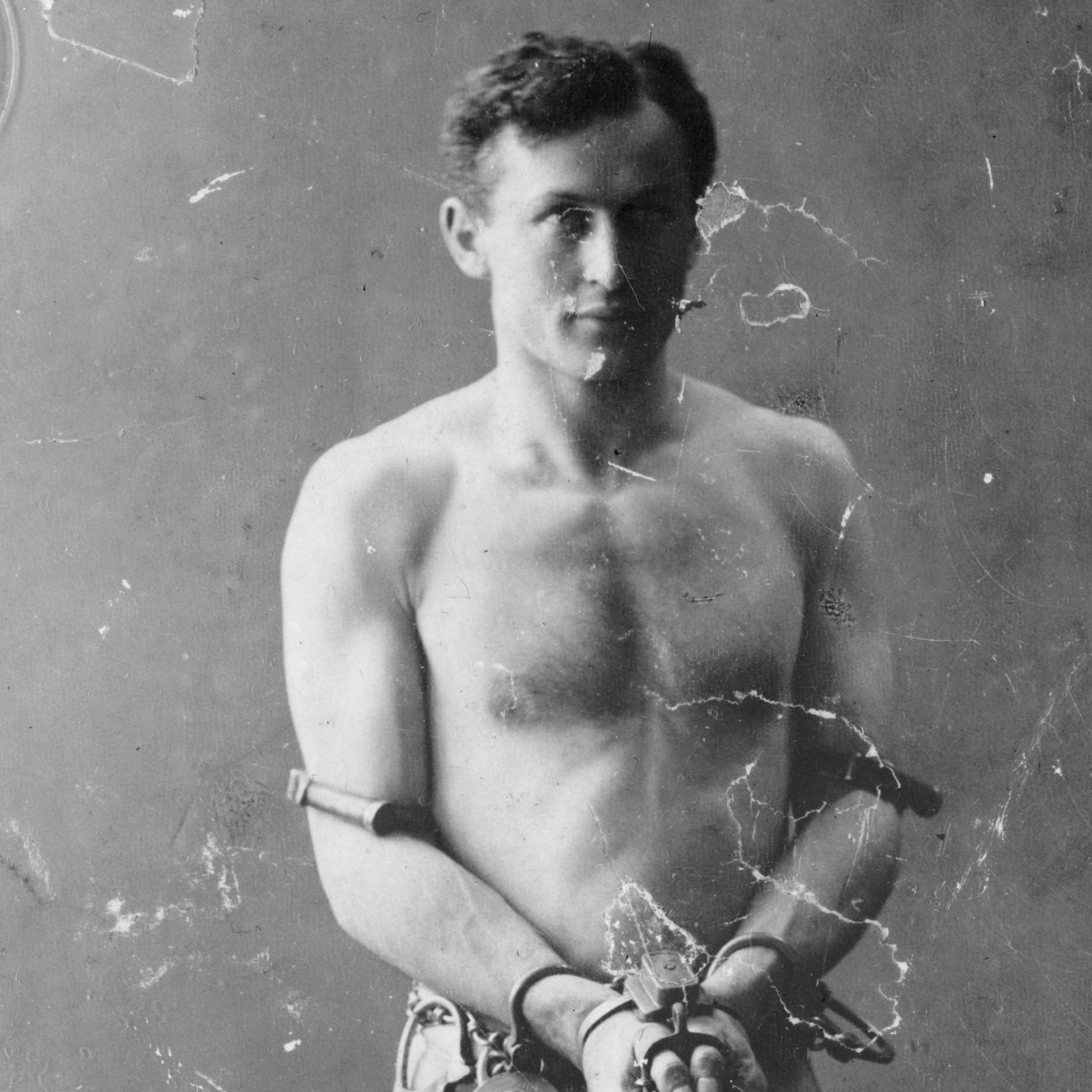
Houdini was insane in how hard he trained. Supposedly, every day he would swallow a potato on a string, and then pull it out. He trained away his gag reflex. He would go for a long run, and then do work like the Indian Clubs, which he demonstrated on stage at times. He would swim, he would lift dumbbells, he would eat tiny meals, several a day. He was constantly training his escapes. The number of calories that man burnt was remarkable.

He was incredibly proud of his physique. He would challenge people to punch him in the stomach. This is an old old old strongman/body-builder trick. You tense the muscles, and you twist slightly when the punch makes contact. You do it right, and the puncher will turn his wrist, and it will feel like they had just hit a wall. It's a great trick, and in the 1890s and early 1900s, you would find a lot of folks who did that gimmick.

Of course, it also killed Houdini, when he took a punch to his stomach from a young man and ended up bursting some innards, killing him a few days later.

The image of Houdini as a tiny man wasn't quite true. He was Henry Zebrowski-sized, 5'5, but he was fit and firm. He had amazing core strength, and even better lung capacity. The Milkcan Escape is one-part chicanery, you've actually got a fair bit of air in there, but it still requires a well-conditioned athlete to complete.

And that's what Houdini was: an athlete. His sport was escape, and he was a champion, and he was so successful because he got people to want to look at him, which was made much easier by the fact that he was a good-looking, well-built man!



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The  
**WITCH**  
of  
*Lime Street*



SEANCE, SEDUCTION, AND  
**HOUDINI**  
IN THE SPIRIT WORLD  
David Jaher



The Witch of Lime Street

Author: David Jaher

Published: 2015

ISBN-13: 9780307451064

Publisher: Crown Publishing

Crown Publishing blurb: **The 1920s are famous as the golden age of jazz and glamour, but it was also an era of fevered yearning for communion with the spirit world, after the loss of tens of millions in the First World War and the Spanish-flu epidemic. A desperate search for reunion with dead loved ones precipitated a tidal wave of self-proclaimed psychics—and, as reputable media sought stories on occult phenomena, mediums became celebrities.**

We all want answers to what our lives mean. We want to know where the dead go when they leave us. We have trouble letting go, and most of all, we just want things to make sense.

In *The Witch of Lime Street*, David Jaher writes about the rivalry between science, seances, Harry Houdini, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and a woman named Mina.

Spiritualism after World War I is a fascinating pocket of history. It's about the search for meaning after a meaningless war in a time of great chaos. How do people make sense of the enormous changes happening around them?

Jaher's overly-detailed, too long book does an adequate job of telling the story of the search for meaning and Truth. It's a great discussion about the need for contact with loved ones who are gone from the lives of many, including Houdini and Doyle, far too early.

It becomes political as Houdini sets out to prove once and for all that all those who hold seances are frauds. In this book, he isn't really a nice man. His belligerence about proving Mina Crandon wrong, while at the same time longing to talk to his dearly departed mother, is off-putting in Jaher's hands.

More sympathetic, to a point, is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who lost his teenaged son to the trenches of war and grieves deeply. Doyle becomes convinced there should be a way for all grieving those the war took to communicate with them in Summerland.

Enter *Scientific American* and its prize money offered to the person who could prove to a committee of judges they were genuine in their abilities. For over a year, the search covered the US and Britain. Each time, the psychic was uncovered as fraudulent.

Then Mina (aka Margery) Crandon, with the right social credentials, comes to the attention of all parties involved. The story of Mina's seances is one of strong personalities determined to prove themselves RIGHT at all costs. Houdini insists she's a fraud but only talks about how Mina could do her "tricks," including manifesting her frolicking dead brother, Walter, and ectoplasm. Doyle is intent on proving that communication with dead is not only possible but can become commonplace.

The other judges on the panel get caught between these two strong personalities and Mina Crandon's gentle, witty personality. They also get swept up in the grandeur of the Crandon's upper crust credentials. It must have been an emotional whipsaw for these poor judges who are portrayed as hardly up to the task.

There is so much detail it's easy to get lost. Yet, the more salacious stuff is hidden behind innuendo. There are many portrayals of the searches Mina had to go through before every seance, including examining her vagina to make sure she wasn't hiding any number of icky things in there. I was creeped out by this. The poor woman. I kept thinking, "You wanna put your hands where?" Alarming.

There were slight hints of sexual impropriety between Mina and some of the judges, including Houdini. But only hints. I suppose, given the times, slight hints were all the original sources would provide.

I'm skittish of the paranormal, so am at a disadvantage in understanding the fascination with heavy tables rising under their own power, ectoplasmic projections, and all the other attendant activities which seem to attend seances. I'm not at all convinced we should be messing with paranormal things we can't possibly understand. Things just seem to go wrong all the time.

After all the buildup, the logical conclusion of no conclusion was an anti-climax. Of course, there was no way to ever prove Mina Crandon's veracity. Houdini died from the infamous punches to his stomach shortly after the *Scientific American* contest was called to a draw and officially disbanded. Mina Crandon lived on, complimenting Houdini gently.

It is a fascinating story but sadly, Jaher's skills were not up to the task of making it a fascinating read. To give him credit, it's a complicated story, one I'm sure he grappled with in trying to bring it into shape.



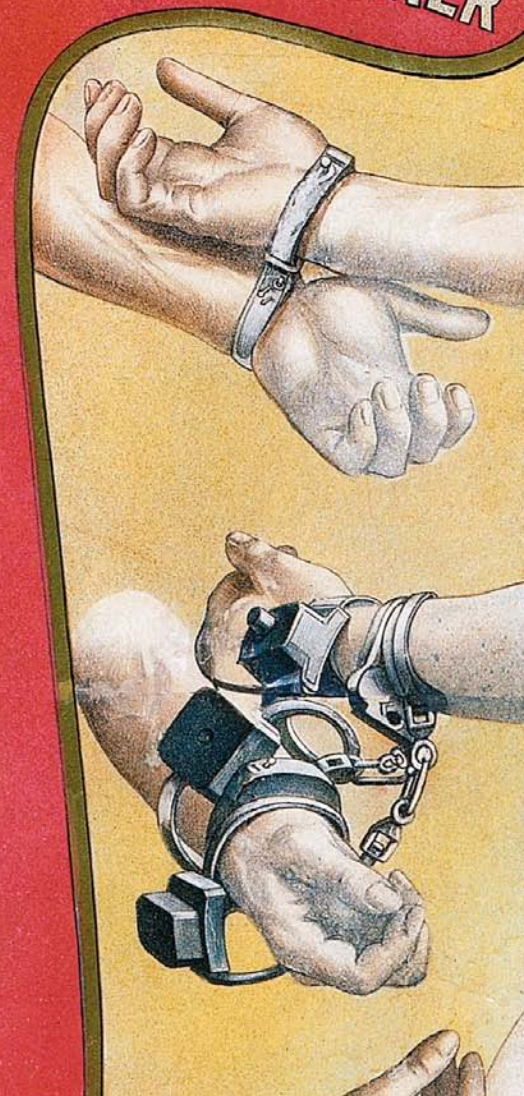
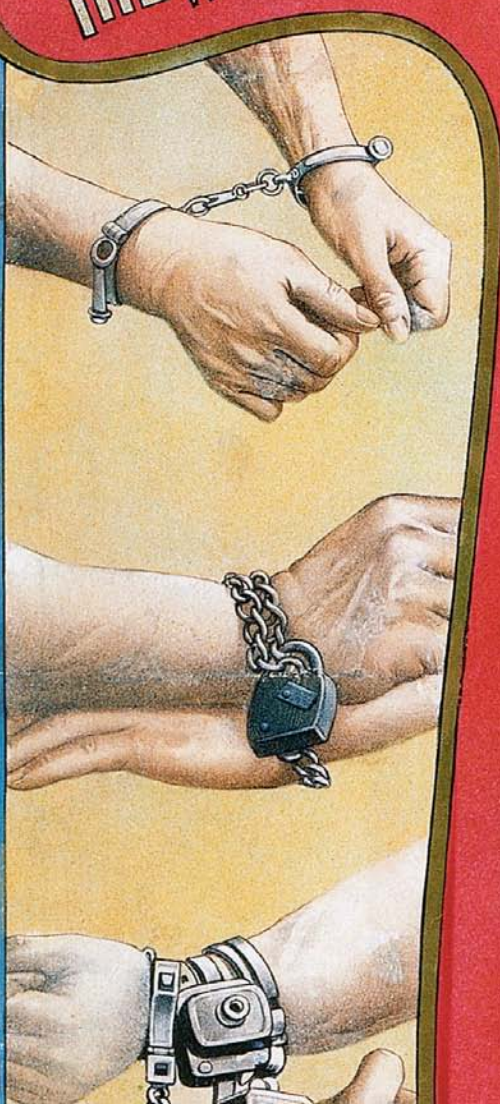
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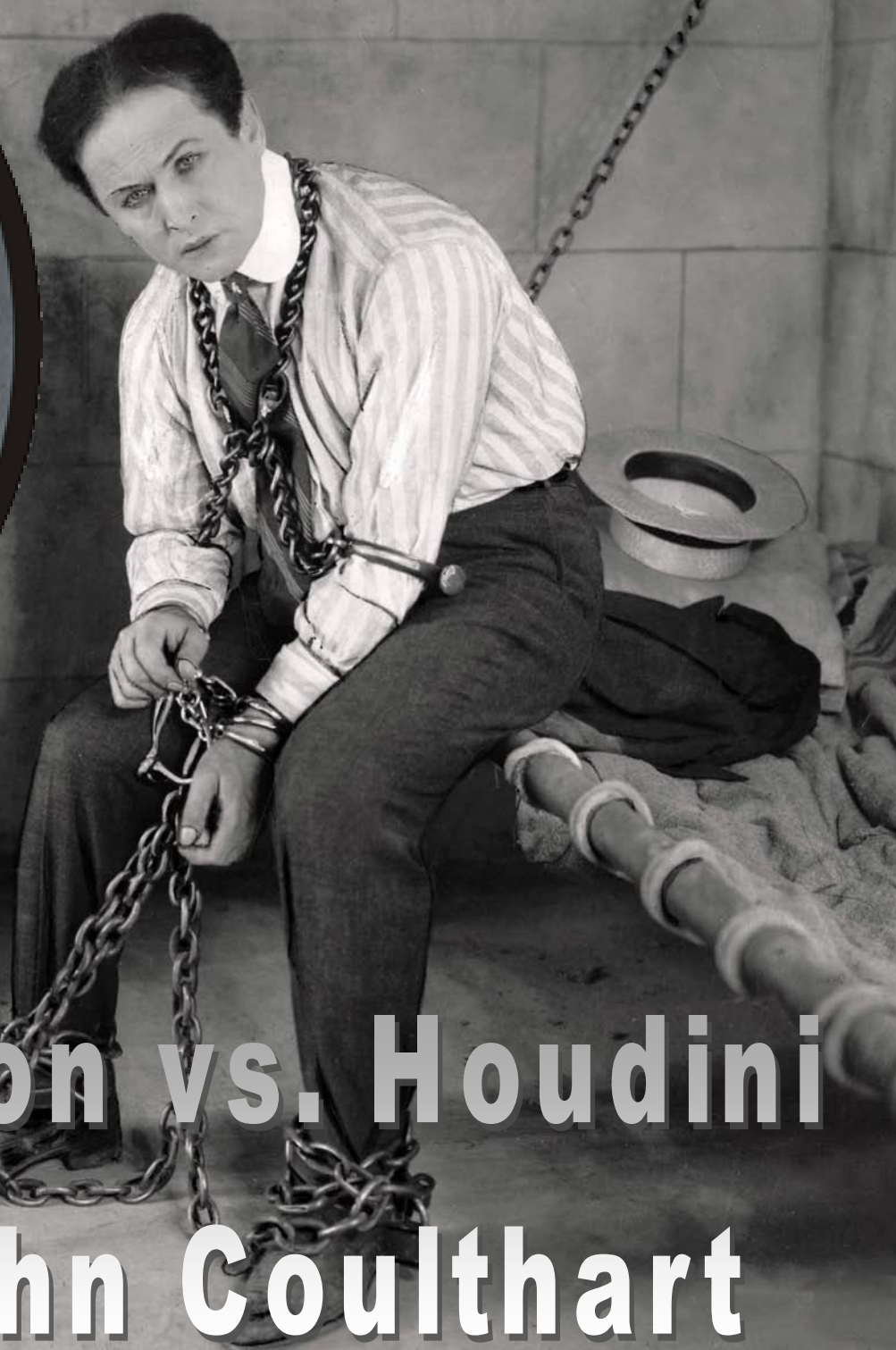
*Stephanie Alford*

EUROPE'S ECLIPSING SENSATION

# HOUDINI

THE WORLD'S HANDCUFF KING & PRISON BREAKER





**Hodgson vs. Houdini**  
**by John Coulthart**

*William Hope Hodgson and Harry Houdini.*

Work this week has had me scouring the Internet Archive's scanned books more than usual for source material. You'll see the fruits of that in due course but the search turned up a small book from 1922, [The Adventurous Life of a Versatile Artist: Houdini](#), an anonymous account of the escapologist's career padded out with many newspaper reports of his exploits in various cities. One of these is the notorious meeting between Houdini and writer William Hope Hodgson on the stage of the Palace Theatre, Blackburn, Lancashire, in 1902. Hodgson at that time was still running his School of Physical Culture in the town and was otherwise unknown; he only began writing the weird fantasy for which he's celebrated when the school failed and he needed to earn a living some other way.

The following account has been reprinted often enough in collections of Hodgson ephemera but this is the first time I've seen it in a Houdini book. Houdini was a hero of mine when I was 12 or 13, not so much for his escapology but for his magic tricks. I had an obsession with stage magic for a while, and had read JC Cannell's *The Secrets of Houdini* (1932) which exposed for the first time the workings of Houdini's tricks and many of his escape acts. It was a surprise after finding Hodgson's work to read about the Houdini encounter. Strangest of all is that Hodgson's books were later championed by HP Lovecraft who ghost-wrote [Under the Pyramids](#) (aka *Entombed with the Pharaohs* or *Imprisoned with the Pharaohs*) for Houdini, a story published in *Weird Tales* in 1924. I've wondered for years whether Houdini or Lovecraft were aware of this connection. Probably not: Hodgson in 1902 was unknown and Houdini's career and fame were such he would have been far too busy to dwell on the matter or care what happened to the diminutive bodybuilder who treated him so badly that evening.

\*

**AN EPISODE IN HOUDINI'S LIFE.**  
***Star, Blackburn, England, Saturday, Oct. 25, 1902.***  
**MANACLED BY A STRONG MAN.**  
**TRUSSED TILL MIDNIGHT.**  
**Unparalleled Scenes at the Palace Theatre.**

Never in the history of Blackburn or music hall life has there been witnessed so remarkable a scene as occurred last night. Houdini, the Handcuff King, and Mr. Hodgson, principal of the School of Physical Culture, provided a big sensation for the patrons of the Palace Theatre, Blackburn.

Houdini, who has been appearing at the Palace during the week, claims to be able to release himself from any of the regulation shackles or irons used by the police of Europe or America, and offered nightly to forfeit £25 if he failed to prove his claim. Mr. Hodgson, of the Physical Culture School, Blackburn, took up the challenge, stipulating that he was to use his own irons and fix them himself. Houdini consented, and deposit the £25 with the editor of the *Daily Star*.

The trial of skill and strength was fixed to take place last night, and the crowd which came together to witness it crammed the theatre literally from floor to ceiling — even standing room being ultimately unobtainable.

Shortly after ten o'clock the parties to the challenge faced each other, and excitement at once became intense.

Mr. Hodgson produced 6 pairs of heavy irons, furnished with clanking chains and swinging padlocks. These were carefully examined by Houdini, who raised some disappointment and much sympathetic cheering by stating that his claim was that he could escape from "regulation" irons. The "cuffs" brought by Mr. Hodgson, he said, had been tampered with — the iron being wrapped round with string, the locks altered, and various other expedients adopted to render escape more difficult.

Mr. Hodgson's answer, given dramatically from the stage, was that he stipulated that he should bring his own irons.

Houdini again protested that Mr. Hodgson was going beyond the challenge, but added that he was quite willing to go on, if only the audience would give him a little time in which to deal with the extra difficulties.

This announcement was greeted with great cheering, and the work of pinioning proceeded.

First, Mr. Hodgson, with the aid of a companion, fixed a pair of irons over Houdini's upper arm, passing the chain behind his back and pulling it tight, and fixing the elbows close to the sides.

To make assurance doubly sure, he fixed another pair in the same way, and padlocked both behind.

Then, starting with the wrists, he fixed a pair of chained "cuffs" so that the arms, already pulled stiffly behind, were now pulled forward. The pulling and tugging at this stage was so severe — the strong man exercising his strength to some purpose — that Houdini protested that it was no part of the challenge that his arms should be broken.

He also reminded Mr. Hodgson that he was to fix the irons himself.

This led to Mr. Hodgson's assistant retiring.

Proceeding, Mr. Hodgson fixed a second pair of "cuffs" on the wrists and padlocked both securely, Houdini's arms being then trussed to his side so securely that escape seemed absolutely impossible.

Still Mr. Hodgson was not finished with him.

Getting Houdini to kneel down, he passed the chain of a pair of heavy leg irons through the chains which bound the arms together at the back. These were fixed to the ankles, and after a second pair had been added, both were locked, and Houdini now seemed absolutely helpless.

A canopy being placed over Houdini in the middle of the stage, the waiting began, and excitement grew visibly every minute.

Meanwhile Mr. Hodgson and others kept strict watch on the movements of Houdini's wife and brother (Hardeen), who were both on the stage.

At the end of about 15 minutes the canopy was lifted and Houdini was revealed lying on his side, still securely bound. It was at first thought he had fainted, but he soon made it known that all he wished was to be lifted up. This Mr. Hodgson refused to do, at which the now madly excited audience hissed and "booed" him for his unfair treatment, and Hardeen lifted his brother to his knees. The curtain of the cabinet was again closed.

Another 20 minutes passed, and again the curtain was lifted. This time Houdini said his arms were bloodless and numb owing to the pressure of the irons, and asked to have them unlocked for a minute so that the circulation could be restored.

Mr. Hodgson's reply, given amidst howls, was: "This is a contest, not a love match. If you are beaten, give in."

Great shouting and excited calling followed, which was renewed when Dr. Bradley, after examining Houdini, said his arms were blue, and it was cruelty to keep him chained up as he was any longer.

Still Mr. Hodgson was obdurate, and the struggle proceeded, Houdini again appealing for time.

Fifteen minutes more: Houdini appeared and announced that one hand was free.

This was the signal for terrific cheering, which was continued after the canopy was dropped.

At intervals Houdini now appeared, and announced further progress in his escape; and when, shortly after midnight, he came out with torn clothing and bleeding arms, and threw the last of the shackles on the stage, the vast audience stood up and cheered and cheered, and yelled themselves hoarse to give vent to their overwrought feelings. Men and women hugged each other in mad excitement. Hats, coats, and umbrellas were thrown up into the air, and pandemonium reigned supreme for 15 minutes.

Houdini, when quietness had been restored, said he had been doing the handcuff trick now for 14 years, but never had he been subjected to such brutality as that to which his bleeding arms and wrists gave witness.

When Houdini again obtained a hearing, it was to state that, not only had the irons been altered, but the locks had been plugged.

It was well after midnight when the huge audience left the theatre, and broke up into excited, gesticulating groups. •

***First appeared on John's blog—[Feuilleton](#)***

B. A. ROLFE PRODUCTIONS

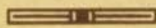
OCTAGON FILMS, INC.

# HOUDINI

IN

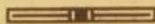
## The Master Mystery

A Super - Serial in Fifteen Episodes



EPISODE TWELVE

### “The Death Noose”



B. A. ROLFE PRODUCTIONS



**The Mastery Mystery**



The Master Mystery is a film serial starring the legendary escapist, magician, spiritualist, fun guy, Ehrich Weiss, better known as Harry Houdini. We have to unpack a few things before we can really talk about it. The first is just the idea of the serial. In the 1910s, the film serial idea begun. Basically, you take a whole film chop it into little pieces. You actually make a whole bunch of little films with a connecting storyline and typically every episode ends in a cliffhanger. It is the direct forerunner for television shows and that sometimes gets lost because usually what television shows are doing, and particularly dramas, less so comedies, are telling you an entire story set in a universe with an ending to each episode that is memorable somehow. The three serials that sort of launched serials into the stratosphere were Phantom Mask, which I think was Italian, might have been Spanish, in 1913, in 1914, the U.S. had one of the biggest ever called The Perils of Pauline, which just blew up absolutely huge. Then in 1915 in France, you had Les Vampires, The Vampires as we called it in the U.S., which was a crime series.

By 1920, there were tons of serials. Lots of companies were doing them and throughout the history of serials you had a lot of big players. Paramount did a bunch. Columbia, and RKO, of course, had all of these. Republic was another company that did them, but they were international. They're all over the place and we'll have a couple more on here as well. This is Harry Houdini in a starring role as more or less a detective who was going after ... Well, I don't want to give too much away, but let's just say he is the only thing in this film that is given any emotional run. There are no other characters in here that really matter.

It's almost as if you could watch Harry Houdini doing his thing and that would be all you needed. In that way, it's not unlike many of the El Santo films where the wrestling was all you needed. And like with those Santo flicks, they felt the need to tack on a storyline that was science fictional in nature. This is famous for being the first time you really get a robot on screen in a major role. The robot is actually really cool. If you've ever read Boilerplate, by Paul Guinan and Anita Bennett, then you might have an idea. It's a steampunk take on this on the idea of a robot in history that goes through and does all these fun things, meets everyone in a very Forest Gump-sort of way. But in *The Master Mystery*, it's a little awkward to be honest. It doesn't look like a great robot. If you remember Tobor, who we'll be talking about later in the series, you'll understand that it's not supposed to look like a robot we would understand. In fact, this may even predate the use of robot in the English language.

Now there's a number of interesting points about this, one is called an automaton, which may actually be more accurate though with the ability to actually move beyond a single set of programs it seems, so it's hard to tell.

There are some problematic aspects to *The Master Mystery*, like there are so many films of the teens in 20s. There are actors in blackface, there are actors in yellow face. It's painfully obvious now, but then, it would not have been out of place, and likely not even blinked at by a majority of viewers. That said, as a whole, this is no different than many of the other films from the period, and we don't really see it change until really the '50s. We start to see some variation in that. Then in the '60s, things get a little bit better and in '70s and so on, but there's still a long way to go.

One interesting aspect of the film, other than the robot, is that it's basically constructed so that we can witness Houdini's escapes. Houdini had done newsreel footage, had all sorts of little films, a few features, made a couple of serials, did a lot of shorts. This one actually didn't do all that well financially, which seems kind of strange. Also, I should note that this does not exist in its whole original form. There's an edit that was done to make it into a single film and there are most of the parts surviving but not all. It's at once kind of hard to judge as a whole, but as it stands, it's watchable, and you get it, you know what's going on. Part of that is the simplicity of the storytelling.

They weren't doing anything super complex. Mostly each episode was a reason to see a Houdini escape and they're fascinating. They're great to watch. I absolutely love them even at points where you know, those of us who have studied escapology and stage magic and its history, can sort of see how things are done. There are a couple of points where I'm fairly certain it's just a bad camera position. Well, bad by good, I mean that you can't tell how it's done. Houdini was arguably the most famous American at that point, maybe other than the president. You had a number of other media celebrities at the time, but none as broadly known. Most notably in my mind, you had Ed Strangler Lewis who was a huge wrestling star and was stretching out into other things. I think Jack London was around at that point. A number of big name boxers, like Jack Johnson and Jack Dempsey, of course. Baseball Players, a few singers and actors. Houdini was so widely-known, he was often mobbed out in the world.

A couple of interesting other magicians were actually just starting to come onto the radar as well. You had these a lot of different stars popping up, but you're also seeing the first generation of movie stars. People who are just created as stars. But really it was Houdini that was this huge, massive star. He sold huge crowds, drew folks to see his escapes, which makes it interesting that why this wasn't a more popular film. It speaks to the whole idea of the external celebrity coming into the world of film. Sometimes this works really well, a great example recently is Mike Tyson. He's done a whole bunch of movies. I think he did a couple of film with Larry Clark. He didn't really mean much to the movies. The notable exception to that being *The Hangover*, which he was a small part of, but on films that are sold with Tyson's name, he's never done well. On TV, he's done well with the *Mike Tyson Mysteries*, though.

There's this idea that a non-star can give a movie ... A non-movie star at least can give this sort of importance, but he wasn't a big movie star. He was a movie star, but he wasn't like a huge name. For example, he wasn't The Rock, who transitioned from a wrestler into a film star and did so brilliantly. Jim Brown going from film, O.J. Simpson, Rosey Grier is the other one going from football to fame. Probably the closer aspect would be a huge name standup comedian going into film. While some may get huge, like Steve Martin or Billy Crystal, but some sort of faltered. Dane Cook has never been a big selling movie star, for example. I think that's probably the best analogy to Houdini who just didn't connect as well with audiences in the theater as he did live. That said, I think one of the reasons for that is while the escapes are phenomenal to us now, then there was something lacking in the transition to film.

You could see Houdini onstage and there's an interaction that happens with the audience that's very different than in the movies because in the movies, people know, well, there are no robots. This is obviously a fake world and the escapes could easily be fake. I think that also played against him. Still, this is a good serial

and I highly recommend it. It might be his best film overall. There's a DVD set called *Houdini: The Movie Star* which is well-worth seeking out. It's got a whole bunch of great stuff. I really hope that we find more of this stuff. I think I read three of his four feature films survive and I hope we find all of them because I think Houdini as a character is a major part of America in the teens and 20s that we sort of have lost.

What's something to look for in the film? The attitude towards Houdini the performer. How a lead from the 'real world' is treated when they go to film is key to understanding who they are and how they are viewed. Houdini is treated like a punching bag, kinda. He's constantly put into situations where he needs to use his escapism, and he never fails to get out of the jam on his own. That's how Houdini wanted to be seen, as able to escape any situation.

And excepting for that last one, he did.





# The Witch of Lime Street: Séance, Seduction, and Houdini in the Spirit World

by David Jaher

Reviewed by Chuck Surface

When he wasn't chained and hanging from skyscrapers, or entombed deep underwater, Harry Houdini spent much time debunking criminals and fraudulent spiritualists. By the 1920s, Spiritualism had taken on religious weight both in Europe and the United States, and as with any such phenomenon, unscrupulous types stepped in to gain profit or to exploit hopeful séance attendees for other purposes. True believers of this practice, the idea that we the living could contact dead significant others through mediums, included Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sir Oliver Lodge, and, yes, even Thomas Edison held some interest in the possibility of otherworldly communications. In fact, Charles Richet, a Nobel Prize laureate in the field of Physiology/Medicine for his work in immunology, invented the term "ectoplasm" to describe the spiritual substance mediums seemed to produce while communing with the dearly departed.

Houdini wrote three books in which he discusses his work to uncover mountebanks. In the first, *The Right Way to Do Wrong: An Expose of Successful Criminals* (1906), the magician hopes to protect the general public from criminal harm, as he states in his introduction:

The object of this book is twofold: First, to safeguard the public against the practises of the criminal classes by exposing their various tricks and explaining the adroit methods by which they seek to defraud. "Knowledge is power" is an old saying. I might paraphrase it in this case by saying knowledge is safety. I wish to put the public on its guard, so that honest folks may be able to detect and protect themselves from the dishonest, who labor under the false impression that it is easier to live dishonestly than to thrive by honest means.

In the second place, I trust this book will afford entertaining, as well as instructive reading, and that the facts and experiences, the exposes 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.

The material contained in this book has been collected by me personally during many years of my active professional life. It has been my good fortune to meet personally and converse with the chiefs of police and the most famous detectives in all the great cities of the world. To these gentlemen I am indebted for many amusing and instructive incidents hitherto unknown to the world.

The work of collecting and arranging this material and writing the different chapters has occupied many a leisure hour. My only wish is that "The Right Way to Do Wrong" may amuse and entertain my readers and place the unwary on their guard. If my humble efforts in collecting and writing these facts shall accomplish this purpose, I shall be amply repaid, and feel that my labor has not been in vain. I hope it will warn you away from crime and all evil-doing. It may tell the "Right Way to Do Wrong," but, all I have to say is "Don't."

In his second book, *Miracle Mongers and Their Methods* (1920), Houdini expands on these themes while building on a quote by Samuel Johnson:

"All wonder," said Samuel Johnson, "is the effect of novelty on ignorance." Yet we are so created that without something to wonder at we should find life scarcely worth living. That fact does not make ignorance bliss, or make it "folly to be wise." For the wisest man never gets beyond the reach of novelty, nor can ever make it his boast that there is nothing he is ignorant of; on the contrary, the wiser he becomes the more clearly he sees how much there is of which he remains in ignorance. The more he knows, the more he will find to wonder at. My professional life has been a constant record of disillusion, and many things that seem wonderful to most men are the everyday commonplaces of my business. But I have never been without some seeming marvel to pique my curiosity and challenge my investigation. In this book I have set down some of the stories of strange folk and unusual performers that I have gathered in many years of such research.

Finally, in *A Magician among the Spirits* (1924), Houdini focuses on revealing tricks phony spiritualists employ – for example, spirit photography, spirit slate writing, ectoplasm, and clairvoyance – all the results of his traveling throughout the nation, confronting various practitioners, even offering cash rewards if any could produce an effect he couldn't imitate with techniques related to stage magic. At the end of his introduction to this book he claims, "Up to the present time everything that I have investigated has been the result of deluded brains."

When I picked up David Jaher's *The Witch of Lime Street*, I'd expected to receive a light reading about Houdini's encounter with Mina Crandon, or "Margery," a famous Boston-based medium who conversed with her brother Walter Stinson who died in a railroad accident. Mrs. Crandon had quite a few followers and supporters, among them Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and a sizable number of psychologists and scientists from nearby Harvard University. Jaher, however, delivers much more to readers than a quick peek at a singular moment in Houdini's life.

Although he never goes into depth about the books I mentioned above, Jaher spends the first half of his book giving biographical consideration to Houdini while outlining the history of Spiritualism, enlightening us on such figures as the Fox sisters, the Davenport brothers, Annie Eva Fay, Daniel Dunglas Home, and

Eusapia Palladino, all of whom were fakes. The author also reveals what perhaps motivated Houdini's quest, the loss of his mother, with whom he was extremely close, about as close as Elvis was to his mother. Houdini despised con artists who played upon an individual's grief and hopes to reconnect with a loved one in some other world beyond this one. Even Arthur Conan Doyle's motivations stemmed from having lost his son. Houdini wouldn't fall for it, and he neither should anyone else.

Much scientific energy went into investigating Spiritualism; so much so that in 1924 Orson Munn and James Malcolm Bird, respectively the publisher and an editor with *Scientific American* answered a challenge Doyle had put to their magazine to conduct investigations of psychic phenomena. The outcome became a search for proof of actual communication with the dead. The search began. Where was there a medium that beyond any shadow of doubt could pierce the veil? The purse was \$5,000, split into two prizes of \$2,500, one for an actual physical manifestation and the other for reliable spirit photography. The investigative team of Daniel Frost Comstock, Dr. Bereward Carrington, William McDougall, Walter Franklin Pierce, and, of course, Harry Houdini then went to work.

Jaher devotes the latter half of *Witch of Lime Street* fleshing out the details of the search, the relationships between investigators, Houdini's part in debunking comers, and finally the several encounters and séances Houdini sat through with Crandon. After many seeking the prize had failed, Crandon proved quite the labor for Houdini. Was Mina Crandon or Margery as she was called genuine? Did anyone win? I think you can guess the answers, but I'll avoid spoilers. Know, however, that Jaher has produced an interesting blend of biography, history, social analysis, pop religious study, and critique of scientific methodology. All fans of Houdini must read this book.

