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Tonight on History's Greatest Mysteries.

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He was the greatest escape artist of all time.

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And his name was the embodiment of mystery and wonder.

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I'm Lawrence Fishburne.

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Even though Harry Houdini has been dead for nearly a century,

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key questions remain about his life.

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On tonight's mystery, Houdini's diaries,

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kept under lock and key in New York City,

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may answer some of those questions.

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00:00:38,000 --> 00:00:43,000

It is the first time they have been made public.

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For the first time we're getting to see Houdini in his own words,

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the most unfiltered version of the man.

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What do the diaries reveal about the real Harry Houdini?

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His background and how he became the world's greatest showman.

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Houdini wanted to be bigger than life,

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00:01:03,000 --> 00:01:06,000

and he would do anything towards that end.

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What was the secret of his mass appeal?

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Houdini was certainly the person who made the idea of an escape artist

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mean something to the world.

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I defy the jails of the world to hold me.

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That is a better slogan than all you need is love.

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How much did he risk to stay famous?

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Up until this point, the stakes were if Houdini fails, it's humiliation.

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Now the stakes are life and death.

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And did his all-out war against the people who claimed to speak to the dead get him killed?

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00:01:38,000 --> 00:01:44,000

Were spiritualists bad enough to commit murder?

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00:01:44,000 --> 00:01:45,000

Yes.

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00:01:45,000 --> 00:01:49,000

Can a university student punch wicked hard?

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00:01:49,000 --> 00:01:50,000

Yes.

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00:01:50,000 --> 00:01:55,000

The legacy in life of a legend who cheated death until it found him.

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The most famous magician today is Harry Houdini.

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00:02:16,000 --> 00:02:19,000

The first magic name people can name?

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00:02:19,000 --> 00:02:21,000

Harry Houdini.

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00:02:21,000 --> 00:02:24,000

Kids on the street know his name when they don't know.

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00:02:24,000 --> 00:02:26,000

Penn and Teller.

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00:02:26,000 --> 00:02:33,000

In any famous person's life, there are at least three different stories for any one event.

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Except in Houdini's life, there are ten stories to any one event.

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Harry Houdini kept diaries throughout his life.

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While some have been released, thousands of pages, some handwritten, some typed, have remained a mystery hidden from public view.

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A handful of trusted magicians and Houdini scholars have been allowed to read them.

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At last, the custodian of the diaries, magic historian Bill Kaluush, has agreed to make them available.

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The diaries now being made available through this documentary is a really big thing.

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And this would be the first time that we'll be able to peruse these diaries and learn more things about Houdini's life and career than we can ever have in any other way.

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The diaries have been organized to help decipher the key chapters in Houdini's life where secrets and questions remain.

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Starting at the beginning.

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Harry Houdini was a personality invented by a very ambitious young man named Eric Weiss.

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When he was 30 years old, Houdini lies about where he was born in his own diary.

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What's the first mystery of Houdini? And it starts with his birth.

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Houdini was born in Budapest, Hungary on March 24, 1874.

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Yet his diary says, Harry Houdini born April 6, Appleton, Wisconsin.

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00:04:15,000 --> 00:04:23,000

Houdini absolutely knew he was born in Budapest, March 24, 1874.

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00:04:23,000 --> 00:04:27,000

He knew he was four years old when he came to the U.S.

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00:04:27,000 --> 00:04:30,000

So the question is why?

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00:04:32,000 --> 00:04:39,000

So Houdini was born Eric Weiss and no one exactly knows why the family would move to Appleton.

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The legend that Houdini apparently would always tell was that his father got in a duel with some member of the Hungarian royal family

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00:04:48,000 --> 00:04:51,000

and ended up killing him and had to flee to America.

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What is known for sure is that Eric's father has a respectable position waiting for him in Appleton.

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00:04:59,000 --> 00:05:06,000

They had a number of Jewish families so they needed Rabbi and that's what his father, Rabbi Weiss, did.

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00:05:06,000 --> 00:05:14,000

He came of consciousness in this idyllic small town where his father is an honored man.

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00:05:14,000 --> 00:05:17,000

There's beautiful fields, there's creeks to swim in.

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00:05:17,000 --> 00:05:22,000

It is the American idyll and that's the world Eric Weiss comes to know.

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Though life is initially good for the Weiss family, circumstances soon take a turn for the worse.

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00:05:32,000 --> 00:05:45,000

When Eric was not very old, they fired his father as the Rabbi and they left Appleton for Milwaukee and things took a bad turn.

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They lived in poverty at that point. They lived very poorly and it was a time that he wouldn't even

recount.

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00:05:51,000 --> 00:05:55,000

He wouldn't talk about his time in Milwaukee because it was so painful.

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00:05:56,000 --> 00:06:03,000

Schooling falls out of the picture and he goes right to work. He understands very early, I've got to help.

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00:06:03,000 --> 00:06:05,000

You know, I've got to help support this family.

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00:06:05,000 --> 00:06:14,000

He went out and did whatever it took when food needed to be on the table from selling flowers to shining shoes to selling papers or being a messenger boy.

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00:06:14,000 --> 00:06:18,000

Work became all important and he was a workaholic his whole life.

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00:06:19,000 --> 00:06:23,000

He probably gave him that drive, that grit and he was determined to make himself into something.

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00:06:23,000 --> 00:06:26,000

But that lack of education was going to go on to haunt him.

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00:06:30,000 --> 00:06:36,000

To help his son escape the harsh realities of the poverty they were living in now, Mayor Weiss took his son to see a magic show.

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00:06:36,000 --> 00:06:40,000

There was a particular trick that he remembered throughout the rest of his life in fact.

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00:06:40,000 --> 00:06:52,000

He saw Dr. Lin, who was a famous magician and he did an effect called palaginasia where it appeared as though he took a knife and cut the limbs off a living person and then restored them.

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00:06:52,000 --> 00:07:03,000

To a young, clearly imaginative young boy, seeing somebody perform this incredibly dark and macabre act, it would have just been captivating.

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00:07:03,000 --> 00:07:09,000

It's going to fire his imagination. It's going to be the thing that he's talking about and will remember for the rest of his life.

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00:07:11,000 --> 00:07:16,000

In one of the newly released diary entries, Houdini recounts the gruesome act.

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00:07:18,000 --> 00:07:23,000

I saw Dr. Lin do it 30 years ago when I was 10 years of age in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

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00:07:23,000 --> 00:07:31,000

He pretended to use chloroform and at the time I really believed that the man's arm, leg and head were cut off.

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00:07:32,000 --> 00:07:36,000

I think Dr. Lin's palagnasia might have been quite formative for Houdini.

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00:07:36,000 --> 00:07:44,000

My own experience is when I was a kid I watched the Twilight Zone in Alfred Hitchcock and ever since I've wanted to do things that have to do with life and death and creepy stuff.

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00:07:44,000 --> 00:07:48,000

So I wouldn't be surprised if Houdini said, hmm, I want to do that.

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00:07:50,000 --> 00:07:59,000

After Milwaukee Mayor Vise moved the family to New York City to look for work and it was almost as though that was the place where the Houdini persona started to take shape in young Eric.

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00:07:59,000 --> 00:08:04,000

The young Houdini's life in New York was what really opened up the possibilities to him.

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00:08:04,000 --> 00:08:12,000

It was not until he got to Manhattan that I think he suddenly looked up and saw the potential of America and of making his name there.

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00:08:14,000 --> 00:08:21,000

He becomes very, very interested in athletics. That really is a natural for him, for his competitive nature, for his love of physical fitness.

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00:08:21,000 --> 00:08:24,000

He becomes a boxer, he becomes a champion runner.

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00:08:24,000 --> 00:08:31,000

His drive was more like an athlete's drive than an entertainer's and it really starts here in New York.

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00:08:31,000 --> 00:08:41,000

The great thing about athletics is if you win that race, you are the best. You are number one and they give you a little medal to prove it.

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00:08:41,000 --> 00:08:51,000

I think that photograph of Houdini with all the medals is very telling of his earnest personality and desire for acceptance and success

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00:08:51,000 --> 00:09:00,000

and showing people that he was not just another one of these nameless, faceless immigrants running around the city.

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00:09:00,000 --> 00:09:09,000

On closer examination, some of them appear to be genuine medals and some of them are sort of milk bottle caps that he's fashioned into medals.

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00:09:09,000 --> 00:09:20,000

So not only did he have the medals that he'd earned and there were quite a few of those, he'd added a couple. He was a natural exaggerator.

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00:09:20,000 --> 00:09:26,000

Clearly, Houdini wanted to be bigger than life and he would do anything towards that end.

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00:09:29,000 --> 00:09:34,000

In 1889, a chance discovery changes everything.

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00:09:35,000 --> 00:09:43,000

So the young Eric in New York City stumbled across a book by Robert Houdin, the memoirs of Robert Houdin, and that seems to be a real turning point for him.

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00:09:43,000 --> 00:09:48,000

It was about a fully rounded character and that's what I think inspired him to create his own.

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00:09:48,000 --> 00:09:51,000

Robert Houdin is known as the father of modern magic.

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00:09:51,000 --> 00:10:01,000

He was one of the first people to ever levitate another human being and Robert Houdin levitated his little son and he called it the ethereal suspension.

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00:10:04,000 --> 00:10:12,000

And people believed that Robert Houdin said that a magician is an actor playing the part of someone with real power.

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00:10:12,000 --> 00:10:19,000

Houdini took this on board, I think, and realized that he had to inhabit the character 100% and to be the character he created.

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00:10:19,000 --> 00:10:23,000

Now that he'd got the blueprint for the persona, what he needed was a name for it.

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00:10:27,000 --> 00:10:32,000

Eric Weiss gets a job at H Richter's and Son's, Tie Factory.

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00:10:32,000 --> 00:10:35,000

While he's working there, he meets a friend, Jacob Hyman.

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00:10:35,000 --> 00:10:46,000

And if the story goes that it was Jacob who said, if you take the name Houdin and add an I on to the end, in French that means like Houdin.

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00:10:46,000 --> 00:10:51,000

And there it was, there it was, the name that you can never forget.

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00:10:51,000 --> 00:10:57,000

One of the reasons people say his name so often is because it comes out so well.

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00:10:57,000 --> 00:11:00,000

Houdini, Houdini.

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00:11:01,000 --> 00:11:09,000

Eric Weiss made his own destiny in becoming Houdini and that was kind of the first stage in his transformation.

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00:11:09,000 --> 00:11:19,000

Eric Weiss was the boy who worked in a tie shop and Houdini was the result of his decision that he was going to express himself.

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00:11:19,000 --> 00:11:22,000

He wasn't Eric Weiss, he was Houdini.

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00:11:23,000 --> 00:11:28,000

Eric Weiss now has a blueprint to change his life.

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00:11:28,000 --> 00:11:38,000

He decides to commit himself to the character of Houdini completely, even if that means leaving his true past and his real birthplace behind.

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00:11:38,000 --> 00:11:45,000

He always claimed that he was an American because I think he felt like he was a product of this new America.

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00:11:45,000 --> 00:11:49,000

In his own words he says, Robert Houdin became my hero and guide.

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00:11:49,000 --> 00:11:59,000

This book became my gospel. It gave him a path to fame and fortune and respectability through magic.

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00:11:59,000 --> 00:12:09,000

For a child like Houdini who was extremely intelligent, who felt hemmed in if you like by his at a lack of education, there suddenly was his road of escape.

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00:12:10,000 --> 00:12:22,000

By 1891 Eric Weiss has changed his name to Harry Houdini and is mapping out a route to the big time.

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00:12:22,000 --> 00:12:30,000

Houdini decides to quit his very good job at the tie factory and go after the dream of becoming a magician.

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00:12:30,000 --> 00:12:35,000

And actually Jacob Heyman joins him and they form a partnership, the Brothers Houdini.

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00:12:36,000 --> 00:12:40,000

Where they could get work at that time were dye museums.

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00:12:40,000 --> 00:12:44,000

The dye museums were entry level show business.

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00:12:44,000 --> 00:12:53,000

You paid your dime and you went in and there might be Cardo the magician doing his card manipulations on one platform.

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00:12:53,000 --> 00:12:57,000

On the next platform there might be a performer who was eating fire.

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00:12:57,000 --> 00:13:04,000

So if the audience lost interest in you they would just drift over to the fire eater or the comedians.

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00:13:04,000 --> 00:13:11,000

You get to do the same thing over and over and over again, sometimes 15, 20 times a day.

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00:13:11,000 --> 00:13:19,000

If you swallowed your needles and regurgitated them threaded 15 times a day for two years you're gonna get good at it.

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00:13:20,000 --> 00:13:26,000

While honing his skills on the Dye Museum Circuit, Houdini gets terrible news.

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00:13:26,000 --> 00:13:38,000

So Houdini was performing in New York in 1892 when somebody ran up and said, hey magician your father's dying.

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00:13:38,000 --> 00:13:53,000

The story goes his father was almost waiting for Houdini. Everybody else was gathered around the bed and his father made Houdini swear an oath to take care of his mother and take care of his family after he passed away.

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00:13:56,000 --> 00:14:06,000

Eric Weiss took this very, very seriously and spent the rest of his life honoring that oath to take care of his mother and that drove him.

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00:14:06,000 --> 00:14:08,000

That drove him his entire life.

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00:14:09,000 --> 00:14:19,000

There are countless entries in the diaries about how much money he's sending home but the fact that he's writing it down kind of suggests that he's almost reassuring himself that he's doing what he should do.

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00:14:19,000 --> 00:14:25,000

He's trying to prove to himself that he's honoring his commitment to his past father.

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00:14:27,000 --> 00:14:32,000

But at this point in his life, Houdini doesn't have the skills to become a successful performer.

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00:14:35,000 --> 00:14:44,000

Houdini was like any other hack magician really, you know, he was playing in dime museums, you know, trying to scrape a living.

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00:14:44,000 --> 00:14:52,000

He's got no prospects and that he's going to go potentially broke. He goes back and lives with his mother on the Upper East Side in New York City.

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00:14:52,000 --> 00:15:01,000

And he's desperate. He's willing to sell his best secrets. He's willing to sell anything he knows and that doesn't work. There's no real demand.

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00:15:01,000 --> 00:15:09,000

By 1898, the 24 year old Houdini, now married to fellow performer, Bess Rohnner, is going nowhere.

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00:15:11,000 --> 00:15:16,000

Yet within a year, he'll be the most famous magician who's ever lived. But how?

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00:15:17,000 --> 00:15:34,000

Around 1899, Houdini has developed, bought a new act which was escaping from handcuffs. He would challenge the audience to bring handcuffs to the theater and he would escape from them.

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00:15:34,000 --> 00:15:42,000

It was kind of Houdini's first step into the world of escapology. The problem is, not many people own handcuffs.

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00:15:42,000 --> 00:15:52,000

Then, very quick on his feet, he realized, well, who has handcuffs? And he goes, he starts going to the police departments and he escapes from them and this is a great calling card for the show.

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00:15:53,000 --> 00:16:06,000

I defy the jails of the world to hold me. It is a literal celebration of freedom from all these people who were, you know, first generation Americans.

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00:16:06,000 --> 00:16:14,000

As he arrives to perform in Chicago in 1899, he has an idea that will change his fortunes forever.

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00:16:15,000 --> 00:16:27,000

He went to the local police station and he challenged them to lock him up and he took the press with him so that they could document what happened.

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00:16:27,000 --> 00:16:39,000

He gets put on the front page of the Chicago paper with a drawing of Houdini's face which is a stepping off point. Houdini immediately understood how critical this was and how important this was.

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00:16:39,000 --> 00:16:46,000

The first time Houdini saw his name and his picture on the front page of a newspaper, this must have been like a drug to him.

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00:16:47,000 --> 00:16:59,000

The incident in Chicago was arguably the greatest turning point of his entire career and created the blueprint of how his success evolved from then on.

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00:16:59,000 --> 00:17:05,000

Just a few months later, Houdini met a man who would launch him into the big time.

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00:17:06,000 --> 00:17:16,000

So in St. Paul, Minnesota, Houdini met a man who was probably the most influential person that he'd met in his life up until that point and maybe ever actually.

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00:17:16,000 --> 00:17:23,000

His name was Martin Beck. Beck was a vaudeville impresario and he ran the Orpheum circuit.

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00:17:24,000 --> 00:17:32,000

So Martin Beck had a lot of clout and he saw Houdini and he did his magic tricks, but he also did his escapes and he thought that's something different. That's interesting.

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00:17:32,000 --> 00:17:40,000

And so Beck said, look, Houdini, I can put you into the Orpheum theater chain, but forget about the magic, lose the magic.

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00:17:40,000 --> 00:17:45,000

Just concentrate on escape. Be the guy who can escape from anything.

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00:17:45,000 --> 00:17:54,000

The advice that Beck gave Houdini in that moment was the thing that changed the course of history.

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00:17:55,000 --> 00:18:07,000

By the summer of 1899, Houdini had been booked to play a chain of prestigious theaters all across the West Coast of America.

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00:18:07,000 --> 00:18:13,000

And every time he arrived somewhere new, Houdini makes a beeline for the police station.

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00:18:13,000 --> 00:18:19,000

Each time he would arrive in a new city, he would go to the police department and challenge them.

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00:18:19,000 --> 00:18:22,000

And of course he made sure the newspaper reporter was with him.

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00:18:24,000 --> 00:18:31,000

It was a great system to be able to walk into a police department and walk out with a front page newspaper story.

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00:18:31,000 --> 00:18:38,000

Houdini was really, really good at getting people to tell stories about him.

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00:18:38,000 --> 00:18:48,000

He was probably the first person to really use the press in a way that would be recognized today.

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00:18:48,000 --> 00:18:53,000

Manipulating the press corresponded with his rise as a performer.

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00:18:53,000 --> 00:18:56,000

They go hand in hand. You can't have one without the other.

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00:18:58,000 --> 00:19:05,000

By 1900, 26-year-old Houdini, the man who could escape from anything, is a huge draw.

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00:19:05,000 --> 00:19:11,000

And he's got a new strategy for getting attention. The legendary Houdini Challenges.

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00:19:12,000 --> 00:19:18,000

The challenges are critical to understanding Houdini.

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00:19:18,000 --> 00:19:24,000

You can't understand Houdini and his fame, why he's enduring in our culture.

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00:19:24,000 --> 00:19:28,000

You can't understand any of those things if you don't understand the challenges.

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00:19:28,000 --> 00:19:34,000

In every town where he plays, Houdini lets himself be put to the test in some new way.

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00:19:34,000 --> 00:19:40,000

In one case it was a giant paper bag, which doesn't sound difficult to get out of, but you had to do it without tearing the bag.

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00:19:40,000 --> 00:19:46,000

He would escape from inside a giant American football, lots of safes as well.

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00:19:46,000 --> 00:19:50,000

I believe there was one escape that he did from a large dead whale.

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00:19:50,000 --> 00:19:58,000

Escapes are inherently boring, but the moment you put a human element to it, now all of a sudden there's stakes that the audience can relate to.

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00:19:58,000 --> 00:20:02,000

And they're going to pick a side, you know, who's going to win, who do you want to win.

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00:20:02,000 --> 00:20:09,000

And it was really smart. Not only the things that he was doing were unique and so would get new press attention,

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00:20:09,000 --> 00:20:16,000

but at the same time was our town going to be the town that beat Houdini.

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00:20:16,000 --> 00:20:19,000

There's only one problem.

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00:20:19,000 --> 00:20:30,000

In all these provincial towns, you might not have enough people to volunteer to do challenges or even to respond to you to do challenges to keep the show up every night.

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00:20:30,000 --> 00:20:37,000

For years people have wondered how these challenges came about. A lost diary entry provides the answer.

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00:20:37,000 --> 00:20:50,000

Writing about a show in England Houdini says in a kind of gibberish, Friday challenge, box built on stage, had three men of Burroughs sawmill, same firm as last time, gave the foreman Coburn, pray pound.

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00:20:50,000 --> 00:20:53,000

The other two men received, be quick.

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00:20:53,000 --> 00:21:02,000

There's something that I didn't understand until reading the diaries, and that's that Houdini would actually pay people to come up on stage and challenge him.

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00:21:02,000 --> 00:21:13,000

He would write it in a secret code in his diary. I can't really explain why he would only put those bits in code. Maybe he just didn't like the idea that he'd paid.

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00:21:13,000 --> 00:21:23,000

Challenges were really delivered to Houdini's door. He most often arranged the challenge and then dramatized it.

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00:21:23,000 --> 00:21:38,000

Thanks to his formula, Houdini becomes a sensation throughout the United States and Europe. But it is in Russia that the persona of Harry Houdini, the man who could escape from any shackles, really sets fire to the imagination.

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00:21:38,000 --> 00:21:51,000

When Houdini gets to Russia, he gets the idea to challenge the police to escape from the Siberian transport cell, which is the box car that you get thrown in and taken to Siberia.

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00:21:51,000 --> 00:21:56,000

So it has this lure around it as the ultimate, ultimate you're done for.

190

00:21:56,000 --> 00:22:04,000

Well, they lock Houdini in and they're very diligent. They search him in every possible place you can imagine that could hide any sort of implements.

191

00:22:04,000 --> 00:22:11,000

And they lock him in and he escapes. The news of this just went across the country as fast as it could.

192

00:22:11,000 --> 00:22:19,000

It immediately transported him to the status of iconic folk hero legend.

193

00:22:21,000 --> 00:22:35,000

The themes of his act really were relatable no matter where you were in the world. You know, people in Russia and people in the UK and people in America, they all wanted to see somebody get one over on authority.

194

00:22:35,000 --> 00:22:40,000

They wanted to see the underdogs succeed and those are universal themes.

195

00:22:40,000 --> 00:22:48,000

He's now arguably the most famous man in Russia. He's the most famous person in Germany, London and America.

196

00:22:48,000 --> 00:22:53,000

He's dotting his way to becoming the most famous performer in the world.

197

00:22:56,000 --> 00:23:02,000

In his diary, Houdini revels in how he's treated by fans and possibly embellishes the details.

198

00:23:02,000 --> 00:23:08,000

He writes, was cheered over and over again as they sang, and will you know come back again.

199

00:23:08,000 --> 00:23:17,000

In another, he writes, mob waited for me and took me shoulder high, carried me home and upstairs, had to make a speech from the window.

200

00:23:17,000 --> 00:23:31,000

It just seems very odd that the audience wouldn't go home. They would wait out in front of the theater for him to come out and then pick him up on their shoulders and carry him to a hotel.

201

00:23:31,000 --> 00:23:34,000

It's just too much for me to buy into.

202

00:23:34,000 --> 00:23:47,000

I think when Houdini wrote in his diary, it was a part of an ongoing fantasy life that he had and a part of that fantasy was an extreme exaggeration of what went on.

203

00:23:47,000 --> 00:23:57,000

It was how Houdini would wanted reality to be. So he wrote it down because if it was in his diary, maybe it happened, maybe in his imagination.

204

00:23:57,000 --> 00:24:00,000

He was carried shoulder high around the town.

205

00:24:00,000 --> 00:24:08,000

I have to think that he was writing these with the idea that in the future other people are going to be reading this.

206

00:24:08,000 --> 00:24:17,000

And he wanted to make sure that they knew how great he was. For Houdini, it's all about legacy.

207

00:24:19,000 --> 00:24:25,000

By 1905, the transformation is complete. All traces of Eric Weiss have been destroyed.

208

00:24:25,000 --> 00:24:33,000

The persona of Houdini is a fresh start. A man without a past. He could build a legend around.

209

00:24:33,000 --> 00:24:39,000

When you get to the point where Nier is famous as Houdini and you have a narrative, it was really important for him that it was upheld.

210

00:24:39,000 --> 00:24:46,000

He knew the diaries were going to be found. If you know your narrative will be told one day why not try to control it while you're alive.

211

00:24:46,000 --> 00:24:56,000

He wanted to be the all-American boy. That whole self-liberation thing just maps right on to the way America saw itself.

212

00:24:56,000 --> 00:25:01,000

Eric Weiss might have been born in Budapest, but was it Houdini born in Appleton, Wisconsin?

213

00:25:01,000 --> 00:25:15,000

The 31-year-old Houdini returns to America to reclaim his position as the country's greatest showman.

214

00:25:15,000 --> 00:25:22,000

And his diaries reveal he is prepared to stop at nothing to keep his seat on the throne.

215

00:25:23,000 --> 00:25:36,000

By about 1905, Houdini was hugely famous in Europe, but it came at the cost of his fame in America.

216

00:25:36,000 --> 00:25:42,000

The problem was, in the void of him being gone, what happens? A lot of copycats started to spring up.

217

00:25:42,000 --> 00:25:47,000

A lot of guys that were trying to do his act, and not even guys that were copying his name.

218

00:25:47,000 --> 00:25:54,000

Everybody was the new Houdini, Budini, Moudini, all of the different iterations of him.

219

00:25:54,000 --> 00:25:57,000

He showed up at people's performances and challenged them.

220

00:25:57,000 --> 00:26:02,000

Oh, really cleverly orchestrated to make great little stories.

221

00:26:02,000 --> 00:26:09,000

But I would not have argued with Houdini over a parking spot. He was a scrappy little mother.

222

00:26:10,000 --> 00:26:20,000

In Houdini's lost diaries for the first time, we find evidence of a secret plan to destroy a fellow performer with calculated precision.

223

00:26:20,000 --> 00:26:27,000

I am going to make a rival act for Minerva, so have advertised for good swimmer females.

224

00:26:27,000 --> 00:26:33,000

Rehearsing Wanda Tim in Rose's office for the new act, she'll call her Oceana.

225

00:26:34,000 --> 00:26:37,000

Minerva was a female escape arts.

226

00:26:37,000 --> 00:26:46,000

Houdini wanted the whole world to believe that he used his superhuman strength and ability and cunning to affect all of his escapes.

227

00:26:46,000 --> 00:26:49,000

He was the symbol of indestructible virility.

228

00:26:49,000 --> 00:26:56,000

So if some small woman could do his act, that completely undermined this whole aspect of his character.

229

00:26:56,000 --> 00:26:59,000

He had to just destroy her career.

230

00:26:59,000 --> 00:27:12,000

And one way to do that was to find another woman that he could control and build her up, give her the advertising that she needed, and to get her in there to destroy Minerva.

231

00:27:14,000 --> 00:27:21,000

Houdini was a battler. He was a fighter. And that is a kind of person I don't understand.

232

00:27:21,000 --> 00:27:27,000

My heart is not with him on the jealousy and on the insecurity.

233

00:27:27,000 --> 00:27:33,000

That's just a part of him that is sad and I don't relate to.

234

00:27:33,000 --> 00:27:38,000

The only reason you could think that he feels threatened by these guys is his ego.

235

00:27:38,000 --> 00:27:45,000

It wasn't enough for Houdini to succeed. Everybody else had to fail.

236

00:27:46,000 --> 00:27:51,000

Houdini's vendetta doesn't stop with his peers.

237

00:27:51,000 --> 00:27:59,000

In 1908, he turns on the very man who gave him the blueprint for his persona, Robert Houdin.

238

00:27:59,000 --> 00:28:05,000

There was a point in his career where he was wealthy, he was famous all over the world.

239

00:28:05,000 --> 00:28:08,000

So he achieved that goal. So what's next?

240

00:28:08,000 --> 00:28:16,000

And I think for Houdini, something that he longed to be was recognized as a great scholar and a

great writer.

241

00:28:17,000 --> 00:28:28,000

He had a lifelong desire, almost a sort of pathological one, to be accepted on an intellectual level as a serious figure.

242

00:28:28,000 --> 00:28:37,000

As someone who was not just physically agile and a clever stage man, but also who was worth listening to.

243

00:28:38,000 --> 00:28:43,000

And this probably harks back to his childhood when he had to give up his education.

244

00:28:43,000 --> 00:28:48,000

His father had been an academic and it really riled him that he didn't have that respect.

245

00:28:49,000 --> 00:28:54,000

But you can't go back and redo all those years of schooling that he missed.

246

00:28:54,000 --> 00:28:59,000

So he thought the way to do this is to write this very scholarly history of magic.

247

00:28:59,000 --> 00:29:04,000

I think he thought that will be the crowning piece of my career.

248

00:29:04,000 --> 00:29:11,000

When Houdini got the idea to write this encyclopedia of magic, it was natural for him to want to go visit the source of it all,

249

00:29:11,000 --> 00:29:18,000

which would be the birthplace of Robert Houdin, his namesake, and attempt to see his family.

250

00:29:20,000 --> 00:29:28,000

And he thinks he is going to be welcomed with open arms and they go, Houdini's here? So what? What are we supposed to do?

251

00:29:28,000 --> 00:29:30,000

And they didn't even want to talk to him.

252

00:29:30,000 --> 00:29:35,000

His daughter gave him the big brush off. She really wasn't interested.

253

00:29:35,000 --> 00:29:41,000

That was the one thing he couldn't take. He couldn't bear being dismissed. So he got his own back.

254

00:29:43,000 --> 00:29:49,000

The Houdini approach is to turn everything into a wrestling match. Everything is a takedown. Everything is a challenge.

255

00:29:49,000 --> 00:29:57,000

That's what the public likes. So hey, how about combining the history of magic with a takedown of the most famous magician of all time?

256

00:29:57,000 --> 00:29:59,000

That's a very Houdini thing to do.

257

00:29:59,000 --> 00:30:16,000

He took on in full force to kind of assassinate the character of Robert Houdin, mainly by trying to show that a lot of the effects and things that Robert Houdin claimed to be his were not his that were created by others and stolen by Robert Houdin.

258

00:30:17,000 --> 00:30:32,000

Destroying the legacy of his former hero becomes an obsession. He writes, wrote material for magicians biography all day, did not even dress, worked from 6 a.m. to 12 midnight.

259

00:30:32,000 --> 00:30:41,000

In 1908, Houdini releases his book, *The Unmasking of Robert Houdin*, but his takedown bad fires.

260

00:30:41,000 --> 00:30:56,000

Not only was the book saying Robert Houdin was not the father of modern magic, but the tone of it was just so intense. *The Prince of Pilferers*, I think Houdini said, I think he hurt his argument by being so intense.

261

00:30:56,000 --> 00:31:03,000

I do think this was the biggest black eye Houdini ever suffered. And if Houdini were here with us today, I think he would agree.

262

00:31:04,000 --> 00:31:17,000

He had to show the world how smart he was. And I think that this was just his ego crying out to say, look at me, I'm also intelligent. I think it was a shameful moment.

263

00:31:17,000 --> 00:31:26,000

To further compound his woes about the reaction to his, a masking of Robert Houdin, his ticket sales had started to slow a bit as well.

264

00:31:27,000 --> 00:31:38,000

Harry's not playing those big, big theaters as he was used to. And it might have been because people were starting to kind of be tired from his handcuff act.

265

00:31:38,000 --> 00:31:52,000

His lost diaries reveal Houdini's anger at not making it onto the posters for a Cleveland performance. He writes, I did not want Ma to come to the theater as I was ashamed to let her see the class of show I was with.

266

00:31:52,000 --> 00:31:58,000

In another, he writes, I'm not featured is this week the first step toward oblivion.

267

00:31:58,000 --> 00:32:06,000

I think that the diary entries really show that he understood that he'd had the success, but it was slipping out of his grasp.

268

00:32:06,000 --> 00:32:18,000

Houdini realized that he had one of two options. He could either reinvent himself or he was on the downward trajectory of his career already.

269

00:32:23,000 --> 00:32:27,000

1907, the appeal of Harry Houdini is faltering.

270

00:32:29,000 --> 00:32:38,000

Audiences are losing interest, so he needs to find a way to win them back. The option he picks is the most dangerous imaginable.

271

00:32:39,000 --> 00:32:53,000

The avenue that Houdini chose in order to broaden the scope of his appeal was jeopardy, was death.

272

00:32:53,000 --> 00:32:59,000

Houdini himself would say, human beings don't want to see another human being die, but they do love to be there when it happens.

273

00:33:00,000 --> 00:33:06,000

Smart magicians make life and death a central part of magic. Dumb magicians don't.

274

00:33:06,000 --> 00:33:15,000

If all you're doing is producing little bouquets and bunnies, you probably won't find your way deeply into the heart of the public.

275

00:33:18,000 --> 00:33:26,000

His bridge jumps were really the first introduction of danger and jeopardy into the Houdini canon of performance.

276

00:33:26,000 --> 00:33:33,000

He would go to a bridge, highly publicized, surrounded by thousands of people that were coming to sea.

277

00:33:34,000 --> 00:33:42,000

And he would be restrained with handcuffs. And then he would jump into the river below.

278

00:33:45,000 --> 00:33:54,000

There is said to be 10,000 people on the banks of this river and on this bridge to see Harry to do this jump and to do this crazy, death-defying escape.

279

00:33:54,000 --> 00:34:01,000

The thrill of watching somebody live or pass. I mean, that's a great story to have.

280

00:34:01,000 --> 00:34:09,000

What could be a more perfect dramatic gesture than leaping off a bridge in danger of drowning because you're manacled,

281

00:34:09,000 --> 00:34:15,000

pausing, and then emerging triumphant at the surface? It's a perfect symbol of resurrection.

282

00:34:25,000 --> 00:34:34,000

In a lost diary entry, Houdini reveals that the bridge jumps were not just to drive ticket sales, but to impress the person he loved the most.

283

00:34:36,000 --> 00:34:44,000

Bridge jump and mother alone. I wanted to have her with me, it being my first big jump manacled. Ma saw me jump.

284

00:34:44,000 --> 00:34:53,000

The sentence that haunts me most about Houdini and his mother is when he was doing bridge jumps.

285

00:34:53,000 --> 00:35:06,000

And the entry he makes is ma saw me jump. And I think about that a lot.

286

00:35:07,000 --> 00:35:17,000

It seems like, at least in my experience, if you're a performer, there is a sense in which you're always performing for your parents.

287

00:35:20,000 --> 00:35:28,000

Harry's mother, Cecilia, was everything to Harry. I mean, he made an oath with his dad that he would forever look after his mother.

288

00:35:28,000 --> 00:35:36,000

And this moment in time was to show his mom that he had done well for himself and lived up to what he said he was going to.

289

00:35:37,000 --> 00:35:45,000

He certainly idolized her. She was a very, very formidable figure that he was spending his entire life trying to impress.

290

00:35:46,000 --> 00:35:54,000

However, in the same entry, Houdini writes, I thought something might happen. He knew that these jumps could easily prove fatal.

291

00:35:55,000 --> 00:36:01,000

The bridge jumps are, without doubt, the most dangerous thing that he ever performed.

292

00:36:01,000 --> 00:36:08,000

If you hit the water wrong from 30 feet, then you could really, really hurt yourself or even die.

293

00:36:08,000 --> 00:36:12,000

Obviously, it's very difficult to swim when you're restrained. There could be a current.

294

00:36:12,000 --> 00:36:17,000

There could be something underneath the surface of the water that he's going to hit and spike himself on.

295

00:36:18,000 --> 00:36:25,000

A lost diary entry Houdini made in 1910 shows just how dangerous these jumps actually were.

296

00:36:26,000 --> 00:36:37,000

Dive 31 feet, manacled. Jumped. Made a bad jump, received a terrible smash in the face from the water on right side and knocked the wind out of me and gave me a swollen cheek.

297

00:36:38,000 --> 00:36:43,000

It was really interesting about the diary entry. You can tell that that was something that had scared him.

298

00:36:43,000 --> 00:36:53,000

He's really taking his life in his hands, but at the same time, he knew that that was a level that he had to go to to make the public care.

299

00:36:53,000 --> 00:37:02,000

Up until this point, the Hancock Act, the stakes were if Houdini fails, you know, it's humiliation, but now the stakes are life and death.

300

00:37:03,000 --> 00:37:12,000

He's pushing the boundaries of what a human body can do, so that naturally lifted his persona to another level.

301

00:37:13,000 --> 00:37:18,000

Houdini was transforming himself into a superhero, a Superman.

302

00:37:22,000 --> 00:37:26,000

But by 1909, he was kind of being eclipsed by a new type of daredevil.

303

00:37:26,000 --> 00:37:30,000

It was the early days of aviation and there was an obsession with it pretty much worldwide.

304

00:37:30,000 --> 00:37:35,000

Lots of people doing it and stealing the headlines, but it was still very, very dangerous at that point.

305

00:37:38,000 --> 00:37:44,000

Flight had become a topical thing and it was quite magical. I mean, the people want to fly.

306

00:37:44,000 --> 00:37:49,000

That's just, I think, something that's in our nature. We all have something in us that wants to be able to do that.

307

00:37:49,000 --> 00:37:51,000

So people are rooting for pilots.

308

00:37:52,000 --> 00:38:00,000

And I'm sure that Houdini thought, hey, I should be getting all that acclaimed. Why aren't you paying attention to me?

309

00:38:00,000 --> 00:38:04,000

So of course, what does he do? He buys an airplane and becomes a pilot.

310

00:38:07,000 --> 00:38:13,000

The very first pilots, these were real daredevils. I mean, these guys were dropping like flies.

311

00:38:13,000 --> 00:38:20,000

And there's lots of entries in his diary that show almost, you could say it's almost morbid, but he would keep track of people.

312

00:38:21,000 --> 00:38:23,000

And when they died, he marked dead.

313

00:38:26,000 --> 00:38:36,000

It does seem a little macabre that Houdini would cut these pictures out and stick them in his diary, as if he was trying to convince himself of how dangerous this was.

314

00:38:36,000 --> 00:38:43,000

And if he could succeed, he has now beaten all of these people who died trying.

315

00:38:44,000 --> 00:38:47,000

His first flight was a disaster. You know, he crashed quite badly.

316

00:38:47,000 --> 00:38:50,000

Although it's, I think he's quite telling that in the diary entry for that.

317

00:38:50,000 --> 00:38:54,000

He talks about the cost of the crash rather than the risk to his life.

318

00:38:55,000 --> 00:39:02,000

Smashed machine broke propeller all to hell, have now paid 12,000 marks on machine biplane.

319

00:39:03,000 --> 00:39:13,000

Houdini's entire life was built around his being able to do any exploit better than anyone else.

320

00:39:13,000 --> 00:39:19,000

So how could he possibly allow himself not to be the first person to break a flying record?

321

00:39:21,000 --> 00:39:27,000

So it's like Houdini had to find a country where no one had flown an airplane yet.

322

00:39:27,000 --> 00:39:32,000

It didn't matter which one it was, but Australia is the one that was available.

323

00:39:32,000 --> 00:39:34,000

So off he went.

324

00:39:35,000 --> 00:39:44,000

In January 1910, Houdini, his wife, and his precious French biplane board a steamer and sail to Melbourne, Australia.

325

00:39:44,000 --> 00:39:50,000

The shock when Houdini got there was that various people are also trying for this prize to be the first, you know.

326

00:39:51,000 --> 00:39:57,000

This drove Houdini crazy. He'd spent a lot of money and a lot of time and a lot of effort to own that crown.

327

00:39:57,000 --> 00:39:59,000

And now he was on the verge of losing.

328

00:40:02,000 --> 00:40:11,000

From Houdini's diary, we learned how almost immediately after arriving, his competitor, Ralph Banks, experiences a terrifying crash.

329

00:40:11,000 --> 00:40:15,000

He writes, came down after a terrible dive head first.

330

00:40:15,000 --> 00:40:21,000

Banks escaped with a blackened eye, torn lips, and a scratched limb. It was a miraculous escape.

331

00:40:21,000 --> 00:40:26,000

What I take from that diary entry is that Houdini saw this as a great opportunity.

332

00:40:26,000 --> 00:40:31,000

The door was cracked open and he still had the opportunity to be first.

333

00:40:31,000 --> 00:40:36,000

The only thing that would have made him happier is if Ralph Banks had crashed and killed himself.

334

00:40:37,000 --> 00:40:43,000

Two weeks later, Houdini manages to beat Banks to the prize. His diary records his delight.

335

00:40:43,000 --> 00:40:49,000

First wheel flight in Australia. I went up three times, never in any fear and never in any danger.

336

00:40:51,000 --> 00:41:00,000

I don't know how much effect that first flight in Australia had elsewhere in the world because all over the world there were people who were the first to fly in that plane.

337

00:41:00,000 --> 00:41:05,000

He had to figure out other ways to keep his name in the headlines.

338

00:41:05,000 --> 00:41:11,000

And of course, when you're doing things that are death-defying, you have to keep upping the ante.

339

00:41:11,000 --> 00:41:14,000

And that's a slippery slope to be trapped on.

340

00:41:20,000 --> 00:41:27,000

In 1916, determined to cement his position in the United States, he was the first to fly in that country.

341

00:41:27,000 --> 00:41:37,000

In 1916, determined to cement his persona as the greatest showman who ever lived, the 42-year-old Houdini unleashes his masterpiece to the world.

342

00:41:37,000 --> 00:41:46,000

A highly potent combination of danger, jeopardy and drama that is still today perhaps the most iconic image in magic history.

343

00:41:46,000 --> 00:41:49,000

The aerial straightjacket escape.

344

00:41:50,000 --> 00:41:56,000

Houdini figured out how to take what could be a crappy little trick, which is getting out of a straightjacket.

345

00:41:56,000 --> 00:42:01,000

And figured out how to make that into a gigantic outdoor spectacle.

346

00:42:01,000 --> 00:42:11,000

There is nothing like that. Image, just a man upside down, hung by his ankles, holding this restraint before he drops it to the ground.

347

00:42:11,000 --> 00:42:15,000

It's like the Mona Lisa. It's one of a kind.

348

00:42:17,000 --> 00:42:24,000

I have a photograph of Houdini escaping from a straightjacket upside down.

349

00:42:24,000 --> 00:42:31,000

The traffic is completely stopped. There's no room for a car to move, but there is one car in place.

350

00:42:31,000 --> 00:42:43,000

And that car has on the top of it a 15-year-old boy leaning on his elbow like this and gazing up at what is obviously an iconic hero.

351

00:42:43,000 --> 00:42:49,000

There is a look in that of pure love and pure identification.

352

00:42:49,000 --> 00:42:55,000

The kind of thing that we often see nowadays with great football players.

353

00:42:55,000 --> 00:43:03,000

He was able to pull that out of people doing what was essentially a magic act. That's a miracle.

354

00:43:03,000 --> 00:43:19,000

Houdini takes the most dangerous path imaginable to win back the adoration of the crowd, but the more daring he becomes, the more his audience expects.

355

00:43:24,000 --> 00:43:29,000

Houdini had found a niche in adding danger into his performances.

356

00:43:29,000 --> 00:43:33,000

There were thousands of people there to see him risk his life.

357

00:43:33,000 --> 00:43:42,000

And I guarantee that the thought process from that moment was, OK, this is great, but how do I bring this on stage?

358

00:43:42,000 --> 00:43:48,000

How can I bring all of the elements that I get from the bridge jump into my show?

359

00:43:48,000 --> 00:43:50,000

And so that was his challenge.

360

00:43:50,000 --> 00:43:54,000

A lot of Houdini's escapes and stunts revolved around the theme of water.

361

00:43:54,000 --> 00:43:59,000

He almost had an obsession with water, you know, having been a championship swimmer when he was younger.

362

00:43:59,000 --> 00:44:02,000

There was the manical bridge jumps into the river.

363

00:44:02,000 --> 00:44:06,000

Then he started doing it on stage, padlocked inside a milk churn full of water.

364

00:44:08,000 --> 00:44:11,000

But the ultimate one was the Chinese water torture cell.

365

00:44:11,000 --> 00:44:16,000

And the great thing about this was the visual, you know, for one it made a perfect poster.

366

00:44:17,000 --> 00:44:21,000

It's a nightmare image. It's a great, great, great nightmare image.

367

00:44:21,000 --> 00:44:27,000

If I walked by a theater and saw a poster with that image, I would buy a ticket.

368

00:44:28,000 --> 00:44:31,000

It really was like a human sacrifice for the gods.

369

00:44:31,000 --> 00:44:39,000

It looked like a torture device, some crazy despots idea of what to do with Christians, you know,

370

00:44:39,000 --> 00:44:42,000

instead of feeding them the lions, drop them in this tank.

371

00:44:43,000 --> 00:44:49,000

Doing the water torture cell escape is extremely dangerous.

372

00:44:49,000 --> 00:44:52,000

It's essentially a glass coffin on stage.

373

00:44:54,000 --> 00:45:00,000

He would have an apparatus of shackles that would come to attach around his ankles.

374

00:45:00,000 --> 00:45:06,000

They could slowly, on his command, lower him down into the icy water.

375

00:45:06,000 --> 00:45:10,000

And the minute they start dipping you down into that water, you know,

376

00:45:10,000 --> 00:45:14,000

your whole body is now flooding with endorphins, you know.

377

00:45:14,000 --> 00:45:16,000

The adrenaline is rushing.

378

00:45:16,000 --> 00:45:20,000

And at the same time, you want to remain calm because you're still controlling your breathing.

379

00:45:20,000 --> 00:45:24,000

So you don't want the moment to get the best of you.

380

00:45:26,000 --> 00:45:31,000

So already in your mind as an audience member, you're seeing this incredible dramatic moment

381

00:45:31,000 --> 00:45:34,000

when Houdini's in there struggling and drowning.

382

00:45:35,000 --> 00:45:39,000

The genius bit of showmanship was asking the audience to hold their breath with him, you know.

383

00:45:39,000 --> 00:45:41,000

So you kind of invested emotionally.

384

00:45:42,000 --> 00:45:47,000

Franz Kukall was his main assistant at the time, and he would stand clutching an axe,

385

00:45:47,000 --> 00:45:54,000

increasingly agitated as a giant stopwatch ticked down the seconds that Houdini was underwater.

386

00:45:54,000 --> 00:45:57,000

And all over the audience, you could hear people going,

387

00:45:59,000 --> 00:46:00,000

as they ran out of air.

388

00:46:00,000 --> 00:46:03,000

Three minutes, four minutes, you know, this is impossible.

389

00:46:03,000 --> 00:46:06,000

He's some kind of, you know, superhuman.

390

00:46:06,000 --> 00:46:11,000

And some guy comes in with an axe and breaks it, and the glass explodes, and the water explodes.

391

00:46:11,000 --> 00:46:14,000

All of this is happening, never happened, mind you.

392

00:46:14,000 --> 00:46:17,000

But this has now happened in your head.

393

00:46:17,000 --> 00:46:21,000

And just at the point where everybody thought, well, that must be it.

394

00:46:21,000 --> 00:46:24,000

He's a goner. He's got to be dead in there.

395

00:46:24,000 --> 00:46:29,000

Houdini would whip out the curtain, completely drenched, out of breath, but succeeded.

396

00:46:29,000 --> 00:46:32,000

And the crowd went wild.

397

00:46:37,000 --> 00:46:44,000

Out of Houdini's whole repertoire, the kind of two iconic images really are the suspended straight jacket escape,

398

00:46:44,000 --> 00:46:47,000

and the dangling upside down in the water torch itself, you know.

399

00:46:47,000 --> 00:46:50,000

Those two images, oddly enough, would secure his legacy.

400

00:46:52,000 --> 00:46:55,000

So he's escaped from everything you can imagine escaping from.

401

00:46:55,000 --> 00:46:58,000

And there's only one thing that you can't escape from.

402

00:46:59,000 --> 00:47:04,000

His diaries offer evidence that death is already on Houdini's mind.

403

00:47:04,000 --> 00:47:11,000

He writes, Ma, Vess, and I go to the photographer's gulakirst and have our photos taken.

404

00:47:11,000 --> 00:47:15,000

I hope not the last time together. Who knows.

405

00:47:15,000 --> 00:47:18,000

The old must die, and the young can.

406

00:47:21,000 --> 00:47:27,000

That diary entry is very interesting, in one, in the fact that it's Houdini really,

407

00:47:27,000 --> 00:47:35,000

expressing a lot of emotion, which again, up to that point, his writings are very practical and scientific in a way,

408

00:47:35,000 --> 00:47:40,000

and perhaps it's part of his process of his awareness of life moving on,

409

00:47:40,000 --> 00:47:46,000

and he's coming to a new phase in his life, and knows that his mother is going to die.

410

00:47:46,000 --> 00:47:51,000

If you do think of these things, what would I do without this person?

411

00:47:51,000 --> 00:47:56,000

And I think Houdini thought of that quite often, because she was a very central point to the family.

412

00:47:56,000 --> 00:48:03,000

After Houdini's father died, he became the head of the house, and with this oath to take care of

his mother,

413

00:48:03,000 --> 00:48:09,000

he's starting to see her getting frailer, and we could see it in photographs of her at that time.

414

00:48:10,000 --> 00:48:15,000

In August 1913, Houdini boards a ship for Denmark.

415

00:48:15,000 --> 00:48:22,000

The gangplank was pulled away, and we started in to throw those long paper-colored strips overboard to the folks onto the pier.

416

00:48:22,000 --> 00:48:28,000

Ma caught a few of them that I threw adroitly to her, and eventually we steamed away,

417

00:48:28,000 --> 00:48:33,000

and that was the last sight I saw of my darling mother alive.

418

00:48:34,000 --> 00:48:40,000

His mother had a stroke while he was on the ship, and his brother sent telegrams,

419

00:48:40,000 --> 00:48:46,000

and when he finally opened the telegram and read that his mother had died, he fainted.

420

00:48:52,000 --> 00:48:58,000

He canceled a contract, he got right back on the ship, and went home.

421

00:49:01,000 --> 00:49:05,000

The story about sitting by his mother's bedside was legendary.

422

00:49:05,000 --> 00:49:15,000

This is probably the closest account we have of him facing real death of somebody who he really loved in a way that he didn't love anybody else.

423

00:49:16,000 --> 00:49:20,000

That night, Houdini places a gift by his mother and writes,

424

00:49:20,000 --> 00:49:24,000

she looked so dainty and restful, only a small spot on her cheek,

425

00:49:24,000 --> 00:49:29,000

and the face which haunted me with love all of my life is still and quiet,

426

00:49:29,000 --> 00:49:34,000

and when she does not answer me, I know that God has taken her to his bosom

427

00:49:34,000 --> 00:49:38,000

and given her the peace which she denied herself on this earth.

428

00:49:39,000 --> 00:49:43,000

Some of the pros in that diary entry about, you know,

429

00:49:43,000 --> 00:49:47,000

I'm sure she's peaceful in heaven and all of that sort of stuff,

430

00:49:47,000 --> 00:49:53,000

is less powerful to me than the fact that he brought home a pair of slippers

431

00:49:53,000 --> 00:50:00,000

that she had requested before he left so that he could put those slippers in the coffin with her.

432

00:50:02,000 --> 00:50:04,000

It's very touching, it's very touching.

433

00:50:05,000 --> 00:50:11,000

Once his mother has died, he really starts to question his place in the world.

434

00:50:12,000 --> 00:50:17,000

That anchor that drove him for so many years to provide for her and achieve success

435

00:50:17,000 --> 00:50:23,000

and fulfill the oath of his father was now gone, in a sense he had fulfilled it,

436

00:50:23,000 --> 00:50:27,000

but now here he is facing the question, what's next?

437

00:50:28,000 --> 00:50:34,000

As he turns 50, his life is at a turning point, his beloved mother is gone,

438

00:50:34,000 --> 00:50:39,000

and his diaries reveal his body is beginning to fail too.

439

00:50:39,000 --> 00:50:43,000

The pursuit of immortality is taking its toll.

440

00:50:43,000 --> 00:50:50,000

He writes, Dr. Parsons examines my body and ankle, claims I am in danger of death.

441

00:50:53,000 --> 00:50:56,000

His body's not holding out, it's got a lot of injuries,

442

00:50:56,000 --> 00:51:00,000

and his escape career kind of feels as though it's behind him now pretty much.

443

00:51:00,000 --> 00:51:04,000

So he's got to find something new, he's not a guy to just lie down and take it, you know?

444

00:51:04,000 --> 00:51:07,000

So as though he needs a new challenge.

445

00:51:14,000 --> 00:51:20,000

By 1920, 50-year-old Houdini is about to undertake the greatest challenge of his life.

446

00:51:20,000 --> 00:51:24,000

He wages war against the new scourge sweeping the nation.

447

00:51:24,000 --> 00:51:26,000

Spiritualism.

448

00:51:32,000 --> 00:51:37,000

It is most basic form spiritualism is a belief that you can communicate with the dead.

449

00:51:37,000 --> 00:51:44,000

Spiritualism has this tremendous resurgence in the 1920s, especially after World War I.

450

00:51:44,000 --> 00:51:49,000

With millions dead, families are desperate to speak to their lost loved ones,

451

00:51:49,000 --> 00:51:52,000

and a new breed of performer emerges.

452

00:51:52,000 --> 00:51:57,000

The medium, a person who claims they can commune with the dead.

453

00:51:57,000 --> 00:52:03,000

Spiritualism at the time is it's a combination of a lot of things.

454

00:52:03,000 --> 00:52:07,000

It is without a doubt a religion.

455

00:52:07,000 --> 00:52:13,000

At the same time it is organized crime, at the same time it is fraud.

456

00:52:13,000 --> 00:52:20,000

But spiritualists were not just wrong, they were really immoral.

457

00:52:22,000 --> 00:52:26,000

Houdini was very conflicted over the question of spiritualism.

458

00:52:26,000 --> 00:52:29,000

He wasn't an out and out skeptic.

459

00:52:29,000 --> 00:52:32,000

He didn't really believe that he could communicate with the dead.

460

00:52:32,000 --> 00:52:36,000

However, he would have given it anything to be able to contact his mother after she died.

461

00:52:36,000 --> 00:52:41,000

But every time he approached someone who claimed to be able to do that,

462

00:52:41,000 --> 00:52:46,000

it was always crass rubbish, and he could see how the tricks were done.

463

00:52:46,000 --> 00:52:52,000

Desperate to find out the truth for himself, Houdini embarks on his own investigation.

464

00:52:52,000 --> 00:52:56,000

I think he thought this was a great intellectual pursuit,

465

00:52:56,000 --> 00:53:02,000

but actually Harry Houdini was entering in probably the most dangerous part of his career.

466

00:53:03,000 --> 00:53:09,000

In 1920 he decided to reignite his literary ambitions by writing a book about spiritualism.

467

00:53:09,000 --> 00:53:13,000

And it was possibly an odd choice, bearing in mind how badly he got burnt after writing

468

00:53:13,000 --> 00:53:16,000

the unmasking of Robert Houdini a few years previously.

469

00:53:16,000 --> 00:53:22,000

Houdini reached out to Arthur Conan Doyle, who was kind of spiritualism's leading light,

470

00:53:22,000 --> 00:53:24,000

really, the main advocate, if you will.

471

00:53:24,000 --> 00:53:28,000

He was very famous at the time, being the author of Sherlock Holmes, obviously.

472

00:53:28,000 --> 00:53:33,000

He had a very keen antennae, always for any sort of celebrity endorsement.

473

00:53:33,000 --> 00:53:43,000

Lady Doyle was holding her own séances and ostensibly building her own powers of psychic ability.

474

00:53:43,000 --> 00:53:47,000

She was an automatic writer. That meant she went into sort of a trance.

475

00:53:48,000 --> 00:53:56,000

A pen in her hand would appear to flow across a piece of paper with words that were not hers,

476

00:53:56,000 --> 00:53:59,000

but that she was receiving from an unseen entity.

477

00:54:03,000 --> 00:54:09,000

By way of introduction, Houdini sends Conan Doyle the unmasking of Robert Houdin.

478

00:54:09,000 --> 00:54:12,000

And within a month, Doyle invites him to visit.

479

00:54:15,000 --> 00:54:21,000

Doyle said, listen, I agree with you that there's fraud, but I found the real thing.

480

00:54:21,000 --> 00:54:23,000

Houdini was excited.

481

00:54:23,000 --> 00:54:29,000

Houdini's lost diary suggests genuine anticipation, not skepticism.

482

00:54:29,000 --> 00:54:33,000

Met Lady Doyle and the three children had lunch with them.

483

00:54:33,000 --> 00:54:35,000

They believe implicitly in spiritualism.

484

00:54:35,000 --> 00:54:39,000

Sir Arthur told me he has spoken six times to his son.

485

00:54:39,000 --> 00:54:42,000

No possible chance for trickery.

486

00:54:42,000 --> 00:54:46,000

There's no doubt that Houdini wanted to believe that you could contact the dead, you know?

487

00:54:46,000 --> 00:54:49,000

He had a vested interest in his mother's case, obviously.

488

00:54:49,000 --> 00:54:55,000

In the summer of 1922, Arthur Conan Doyle invites Houdini and Bess down to Atlantic City

489

00:54:55,000 --> 00:54:58,000

to spend the weekend and have a good time.

490

00:54:59,000 --> 00:55:04,000

And it's during this time that Doyle invites Houdini to a private science.

491

00:55:04,000 --> 00:55:10,000

Doyle said, you know, your mother is trying to get in contact with you through Lady Doyle.

492

00:55:10,000 --> 00:55:17,000

Houdini didn't go there or even consider it that Doyle was going to try to defraud him or fool him.

493

00:55:17,000 --> 00:55:20,000

He was really wondering whether it would work.

494

00:55:20,000 --> 00:55:24,000

He really hoped perhaps his mother might come through.

495

00:55:25,000 --> 00:55:30,000

This extraordinary diary entry details what happens in the room.

496

00:55:30,000 --> 00:55:36,000

Sir Arthur asked Lady Doyle who was standing alongside of me and was it my mother.

497

00:55:36,000 --> 00:55:44,000

Lady Doyle's hand struck the table three times, signifying yes, that my mother was alongside of me.

498

00:55:44,000 --> 00:55:52,000

Shortly thereafter, a pencil in Lady Doyle's hand began to move, apparently, of its own accord.

499

00:55:52,000 --> 00:55:57,000

And he received a several pages long message from his mother.

500

00:56:00,000 --> 00:56:04,000

Houdini transcribes everything Lady Doyle had claimed his mother told her.

501

00:56:04,000 --> 00:56:10,000

He's cautious and he is recording everything that happened in this seance

502

00:56:10,000 --> 00:56:15,000

because this is going to become a point of dispute later on. It's very important.

503

00:56:16,000 --> 00:56:19,000

Part of that message reads,

504

00:56:19,000 --> 00:56:23,000

Never had a mother such a son. Tell him not to grieve.

505

00:56:23,000 --> 00:56:27,000

God bless you too, Sir Arthur, for what you are doing for us.

506

00:56:27,000 --> 00:56:33,000

A happiness awaits him that he has never dreamed of. His eyes will soon be opened.

507

00:56:33,000 --> 00:56:38,000

And Houdini didn't show it at the time, but I think it must have enraged him

508

00:56:38,000 --> 00:56:43,000

because in looking at that, what he can see is I'm being manipulated.

509

00:56:43,000 --> 00:56:45,000

They think I'm stupid.

510

00:56:48,000 --> 00:56:53,000

Now, of course, Houdini's a superstar. Arthur Conan Doyle is a superstar.

511

00:56:53,000 --> 00:56:59,000

They are going to drag him into press interviews like Britney Spears has dragged into interviews.

512

00:56:59,000 --> 00:57:02,000

They're going to say, what did you think?

513

00:57:02,000 --> 00:57:09,000

And at this point, Houdini says, I don't believe it was real. It couldn't have been.

514

00:57:10,000 --> 00:57:14,000

On December 19th, 1922, the gloves come off.

515

00:57:14,000 --> 00:57:19,000

Houdini writes a deposition that declares Lady Doyle to be a fraud.

516

00:57:19,000 --> 00:57:24,000

Of course, Conan Doyle and his wife, Lady Doyle, took great umbrage to this.

517

00:57:24,000 --> 00:57:26,000

They were very upset. They took it personally.

518

00:57:26,000 --> 00:57:31,000

The fact that his wife's mediumship specifically was being questioned

519

00:57:31,000 --> 00:57:35,000

was, I think, really what lit the blue touch paper with Doyle.

520

00:57:35,000 --> 00:57:37,000

He was absolutely incensed.

521

00:57:38,000 --> 00:57:44,000

Writing in the press, Houdini vows that he will seek out and expose all fake mediums.

522

00:57:44,000 --> 00:57:52,000

Houdini felt that absolutely gut level as a moral issue of the greatest power.

523

00:57:52,000 --> 00:57:58,000

Houdini was facing a pretty powerful, essentially, mafia of spiritualists.

524

00:58:00,000 --> 00:58:03,000

People were making money hand over fist.

525

00:58:03,000 --> 00:58:08,000

It was popular with the Upper Crust, so that there was a lot of money to be stolen.

526

00:58:08,000 --> 00:58:11,000

It was a real, real good racket.

527

00:58:11,000 --> 00:58:16,000

These people were really crazy successful and rolling in dough.

528

00:58:16,000 --> 00:58:22,000

There had been mediums in the past who had poisoned people or beaten people or killed people over these very issues.

529

00:58:22,000 --> 00:58:25,000

He went to it with open eyes.

530

00:58:26,000 --> 00:58:29,000

The End

531

00:58:31,000 --> 00:58:36,000

1923, Houdini's war against bogus mediums is about to accelerate.

532

00:58:40,000 --> 00:58:45,000

And to bolster his case, he teams up with Scientific American magazine.

533

00:58:46,000 --> 00:58:54,000

Scientific American offered a \$2,500 prize if you could demonstrate something that would be essentially supernatural

534

00:58:54,000 --> 00:58:56,000

in the presence of their committee.

535

00:58:57,000 --> 00:59:04,000

One of the members of the Scientific American committee, Malcolm J. Byrd, proposed a woman named Marjorie,

536

00:59:04,000 --> 00:59:09,000

who was a medium in Boston to be one of the candidates for this prize.

537

00:59:10,000 --> 00:59:19,000

Houdini learned of this. He said, wait a minute, no one's getting any prize until I sit with Marjorie.

538

00:59:19,000 --> 00:59:21,000

Marjorie was a very interesting medium.

539

00:59:21,000 --> 00:59:25,000

She was the third wife of Dr. LaRoy Crandon.

540

00:59:25,000 --> 00:59:34,000

She and her husband started doing these seances in their home, inviting the top tier of Boston society.

541

00:59:34,000 --> 00:59:37,000

And what went on in these seances was wild.

542

00:59:37,000 --> 00:59:42,000

You know, some mediums might levitate a table to show a spirit is present.

543

00:59:42,000 --> 00:59:47,000

It's said that Marjorie's table would actually get up and chase people out of the room.

544

00:59:48,000 --> 00:59:51,000

People said they lost weight because of the psychic energy.

545

00:59:51,000 --> 00:59:56,000

She channeled her dead brother, who told dirty jokes.

546

00:59:56,000 --> 01:00:04,000

Marjorie also did her seances nude except for a silk kimono, and you could search the medium if you so desired.

547

01:00:04,000 --> 01:00:10,000

She was just the most interesting and exciting medium of that time. She was a star.

548

01:00:11,000 --> 01:00:22,000

Behind the scenes, Conan Doyle and Crandon were writing to each other and concerned that Houdini was going to be on this committee to try to prove that Marjorie wasn't real.

549

01:00:22,000 --> 01:00:29,000

This is the championship bout, the greatest medium against the greatest exposure of fraudulent mediums.

550

01:00:29,000 --> 01:00:31,000

Kind of everything hangs in the balance.

551

01:00:32,000 --> 01:00:39,000

It was probably a pretty tense night, that first seance. They were sort of feeling each other out.

552

01:00:39,000 --> 01:00:43,000

They didn't really know how Houdini was going to respond.

553

01:00:47,000 --> 01:00:50,000

Marjorie channeled her dead brother, Walter, to speak through her.

554

01:00:50,000 --> 01:00:56,000

The spirit said, what would you like me to do with this trumpet?

555

01:00:57,000 --> 01:01:05,000

And Houdini said, well, make it full to the floor. I'm sure enough, a second or two later in the dark room, it clattered to the floor.

556

01:01:08,000 --> 01:01:15,000

It actually hit Houdini on the feet. Marjorie was thrown back in her chair, and that was the main event.

557

01:01:15,000 --> 01:01:22,000

And for Houdini, it was by the book, classic fraud tricks that he's known about for many, many years.

558

01:01:22,000 --> 01:01:30,000

They go back to the hotel, Houdini and the Scientific American Committee, and he says as much and wants to out her immediately, like they've done with other mediums before that.

559

01:01:35,000 --> 01:01:43,000

But other heads prevailed and advised him to wait for at least one more seance, before they made any public statement about her.

560

01:01:43,000 --> 01:01:50,000

So for the second seance, he devised this contraption, essentially a box that contained her entire body.

561

01:01:50,000 --> 01:01:59,000

Stopping her from doing anything, proving in theory that it was the spirit Walter that was actually doing the physical manifestations.

562

01:01:59,000 --> 01:02:05,000

There's so many fascinating dynamics in that second seance, because Houdini does get his limitations put in place.

563

01:02:06,000 --> 01:02:12,000

And that succeeds in stopping Marjorie from making any physical manifestations from occurring.

564

01:02:12,000 --> 01:02:16,000

It was an acrimonious seance to put it very mildly.

565

01:02:17,000 --> 01:02:24,000

Walter started singing little songs, calling Houdini epithets, anti-Jewish epithets.

566

01:02:24,000 --> 01:02:31,000

The phrase, you're a son of a Houdini, was the one that sort of take away phrase of the seance.

567

01:02:35,000 --> 01:02:41,000

It must have affected him, it was a direct personal attack on Houdini and also the memory of his mother.

568

01:02:41,000 --> 01:02:48,000

It did make him very angry, and Walter then became threatening and started saying that Houdini wasn't going to live.

569

01:02:48,000 --> 01:02:52,000

That he was going to put a curse on him, that was going to last until the day he died.

570

01:02:54,000 --> 01:03:04,000

Houdini had won this battle, had succeeded in stopping her, and now it was just coming out as this vitriol that would then soon really explode.

571

01:03:05,000 --> 01:03:18,000

In February 1925, the Scientific American rejected Marjorie's claim to their prize.

572

01:03:20,000 --> 01:03:28,000

I think it was a major victory for Houdini, and if this had gone the other way, I think it could have been very damaging to Houdini's reputation.

573

01:03:28,000 --> 01:03:34,000

He had this opportunity now to keep his name in front of the public in a different way altogether.

574

01:03:34,000 --> 01:03:42,000

He discovered that he no longer had to jump off a bridge into a freezing cold river to end up on the front page.

575

01:03:42,000 --> 01:03:50,000

He could expose exactly how these mediums are doing what they're doing, and he still got huge press coverage.

576

01:03:50,000 --> 01:03:59,000

So he went for it, despite the danger and regardless of the threats and the other insults that were thrown his way.

577

01:04:00,000 --> 01:04:08,000

What Houdini I don't think knew he was monkeying with was the level of complete immorality.

578

01:04:08,000 --> 01:04:15,000

Spiritualists at the time were organized as criminals and were also part of organized crime.

579

01:04:15,000 --> 01:04:20,000

It's like you're dealing with, you know, a drug cartel.

580

01:04:20,000 --> 01:04:24,000

Many of these people wanted to see him dead.

581

01:04:32,000 --> 01:04:42,000

1925, Houdini's secret diaries reveal he has a new obsession, one that many believe would lead to his demise.

582

01:04:43,000 --> 01:04:53,000

Houdini would go to these mediums himself, sometimes in disguise. There's a great photo of Houdini as an old man, partly for his own entertainment, under the guise of getting research.

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01:04:53,000 --> 01:05:01,000

He would go in and get out reading, he would play a lot, and as soon as they slipped up he would be

like, ah, it is I, Houdini, I'm shutting this place down.

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01:05:03,000 --> 01:05:10,000

After this information was gathered he would use it in his show, and he would publicly expose the most egregious of these mediums.

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01:05:10,000 --> 01:05:18,000

I believe that Houdini's passion was absolutely genuine, but I don't think at any point he ever forgot that conflict makes a great story.

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01:05:18,000 --> 01:05:24,000

All of these things made great press at the same time that they were actually making a very important point.

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01:05:26,000 --> 01:05:30,000

The mediums and their shrinking wallets are livid.

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01:05:31,000 --> 01:05:37,000

Spiritualists were very fond of making indirect death threats. Houdini doesn't have long to live.

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01:05:37,000 --> 01:05:47,000

You know, Houdini's not long for this world. So the atmosphere around him included an element of really virulent hostility.

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01:05:50,000 --> 01:06:01,000

People writing him letters, threatening him, putting curses on him, it became a new level of aggression towards Houdini enough that he would mention it in newspaper articles.

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01:06:02,000 --> 01:06:11,000

For all of his public bravado, Houdini is becoming greatly unnerved by these constant threats.

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01:06:14,000 --> 01:06:21,000

Obviously Houdini was fronting it out, but you get the idea that behind the scenes he was actually quite worried. You know, these organizations had real clout behind them.

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01:06:21,000 --> 01:06:32,000

There's hostility in the air. There's criminal activity on all sides. There's this weird feeling of hatred that he, I don't believe previously, had been living with.

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01:06:32,000 --> 01:06:40,000

I don't think he had been living with that poisonous sort of thing where there's a group of people that just hate you all the time.

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01:06:40,000 --> 01:06:43,000

That's a difficult thing emotionally to deal with.

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01:06:44,000 --> 01:06:49,000

By the fall of 1926, the feud is taking its toll.

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01:06:50,000 --> 01:07:00,000

He seemed to be breaking a little bit. He called a longtime friend, Joseph Dunninger, to come over at midnight in a rainy night.

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01:07:00,000 --> 01:07:07,000

He collects Houdini, they drive off, and suddenly Houdini says, you know, turn around, Joe, go back to the house.

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01:07:07,000 --> 01:07:14,000

Houdini gets out, stands staring at his house, and then gets back in the car and says, OK, we can go.

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01:07:14,000 --> 01:07:18,000

And they leave and Dunninger turns and sees that Houdini's crying.

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01:07:18,000 --> 01:07:25,000

That's when Harry proclaims to Joe, that's the last time I've seen my house. I will never see it again.

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01:07:25,000 --> 01:07:33,000

Turns out that was the last time he saw his house. But it's fascinating. Did Houdini have a premonition of his own death?

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01:07:33,000 --> 01:07:43,000

On October the 19th in 1926, Houdini gave a lecture at McGill University in Montreal.

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01:07:43,000 --> 01:07:48,000

Houdini was giving these spiritualistic lectures. It was like his new act in a way.

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01:07:48,000 --> 01:07:55,000

And it was a much easier act to perform because it was basically a lecture, but he would demonstrate some of the methods that fraudulent mediums would use.

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01:07:57,000 --> 01:08:01,000

He spoke very vitriolically about Marjorie and Lady Doyle.

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01:08:01,000 --> 01:08:10,000

It raised the hairs in the backs of the reporters next enough to mention it in the papers that it was quite a scathing attack, which inevitably got back to them.

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01:08:13,000 --> 01:08:20,000

After the lecture, Houdini is relaxing in a common room or dressing room. He's surrounded by students and people that wanted to talk to him.

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01:08:21,000 --> 01:08:30,000

And it was at this casual gathering of students, after this lecture, where he started to boast that he could withstand punches.

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01:08:32,000 --> 01:08:40,000

He said, hey, if anyone wants to punch me in the stomach, I can take it. And a student named Gerard Pickleman did indeed punch him in the stomach.

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01:08:42,000 --> 01:08:47,000

And to his credit, Houdini didn't react, didn't wince, just stood there and took it.

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01:08:47,000 --> 01:08:55,000

And that was kind of the wrap-up of the evening. So that was ostensibly punch number one for Houdini while he was in Montreal.

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01:08:56,000 --> 01:09:08,000

Tuesday he does this performance. Then that Friday, Houdini goes to the theater and he's met at the theater by two students who want to chat with him.

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01:09:10,000 --> 01:09:16,000

They sit with Houdini. Houdini is laying down on the couch, relaxing while this student begins to sketch him.

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01:09:17,000 --> 01:09:22,000

Shortly after, another student comes in, J. Gordon Whitehead.

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01:09:25,000 --> 01:09:29,000

He came in and immediately started initiating a lot of conversation with Houdini.

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01:09:30,000 --> 01:09:36,000

Apparently the conversation turned towards his physical strength and his ability to withstand a blow to the stomach.

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01:09:37,000 --> 01:09:39,000

Whitehead said, could I test your stomach muscles?

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01:09:40,000 --> 01:09:45,000

Some people characterized it as sudden. That Whitehead suddenly came at him and started punching.

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01:09:49,000 --> 01:09:54,000

And he hit him two or three times before one of the other students told him to lay off.

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01:09:55,000 --> 01:09:59,000

By then, the damage had almost certainly been done.

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01:10:04,000 --> 01:10:12,000

I don't think he was aware of the severity of it. Even the night that he was attacked in his dressing room, he went on and gave a show.

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01:10:15,000 --> 01:10:21,000

They basically had to force him to go to hospital, at which point they decided that they needed to operate.

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01:10:21,000 --> 01:10:28,000

And as soon as they opened him up, the doctors, the surgeon, realized just how serious the situation was.

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01:10:30,000 --> 01:10:36,000

They didn't have antibiotics like we have now. Probably they knew that there wasn't much chance.

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01:10:37,000 --> 01:10:48,000

He basically hung on for, what was it, seven or eight days. He was in his brother Theo's arms and he said, I'm tired of fighting.

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01:10:48,000 --> 01:10:50,000

I guess this thing is going to get me.

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01:10:51,000 --> 01:10:54,000

And we would lose Harry Houdini on October 31, 1926.

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01:11:03,000 --> 01:11:12,000

Houdini's death really did shock people. The great Houdini, who couldn't be defeated, is suddenly dead. It was truly shocking.

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01:11:12,000 --> 01:11:25,000

I think people had a hard time accepting the fact that the great Houdini, the guy that defied death all of his life, was punched in the stomach by a college kid and it killed him.

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01:11:26,000 --> 01:11:30,000

It's like, how can that be? There's got to be more to it than that.

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01:11:32,000 --> 01:11:38,000

Almost immediately there were rumors in the newspapers and swirling around that Houdini had been murdered.

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01:11:39,000 --> 01:11:49,000

And like any time a celebrity dies, it opens the door to conspiracy theories. The tabloid press begin to make these suggestions almost from the beginning.

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01:11:50,000 --> 01:11:56,000

All those threats, it just raises the question as to were there plots against him.

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01:11:57,000 --> 01:12:01,000

What exactly happened? How could Houdini be brought down so quickly? Was there more to the story?

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01:12:09,000 --> 01:12:21,000

Halloween 1926, Houdini the Superman is dead. Immediately rumors begin to swirl, had Houdini been murdered.

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01:12:24,000 --> 01:12:34,000

The first group that fall under suspicion are the spiritualists. After their relentless campaign of death threats, they are impossible to ignore.

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01:12:35,000 --> 01:12:44,000

True believers, once you get someone who's talking about God and the great beyond, that's an end that justifies any means.

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01:12:45,000 --> 01:12:52,000

And I also know the spiritualists are terrible, terrible, awful criminals and are not beyond poison.

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01:12:55,000 --> 01:13:01,000

The great beneficiaries of Houdini's death were spiritualists and people like Doyle and Crandon.

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01:13:01,000 --> 01:13:08,000

They become the leading lights in the spiritualist movement with Houdini out the way. The world was oyster.

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01:13:09,000 --> 01:13:18,000

We know that the spiritualists were definitely celebrating this moment. Crandon was kind of gloating to Doyle that Houdini was dead.

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01:13:20,000 --> 01:13:25,000

The newspapers began reporting that Doyle had been predicting Houdini's death.

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01:13:26,000 --> 01:13:37,000

So it does seem plausible that perhaps in this vast decentralized network of fanatical spiritualists that somebody could take that in a very real way and act on it.

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01:13:37,000 --> 01:13:42,000

So I think Houdini expected something to happen. He took to carrying a gun.

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01:13:44,000 --> 01:13:49,000

People ask, was J. Gordon Whitehead part of a plot to kill Houdini?

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01:13:50,000 --> 01:14:04,000

People were trying to tie Whitehead to the spiritualist movement and say that he knew Crandon and maybe they had colluded in some way in order to murder Houdini.

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01:14:05,000 --> 01:14:13,000

And it also seems quite evident that Houdini was aware of who Whitehead was before this happened in his dressing room.

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01:14:13,000 --> 01:14:25,000

It wasn't just a stranger who wandered in. He was returning a book. He also claimed in his deposition that he was in touch with Houdini two more times before Houdini left Montreal.

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01:14:25,000 --> 01:14:33,000

So I think it's likely that Whitehead was connected in some way to spiritualists.

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01:14:34,000 --> 01:14:45,000

Eyewitness testimonial, rarely seen in public sense, claims Whitehead asked Houdini a series of questions before he punched him in the stomach.

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01:14:48,000 --> 01:14:59,000

One of the tactics of the spiritualists at that time were to try to turn the conversation to the point where they said that Jesus and the apostles were actually mediums.

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01:15:00,000 --> 01:15:08,000

And at one point Whitehead though does ask Houdini, you know, how do you explain the miracles in the Bible? Are those frauds?

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01:15:11,000 --> 01:15:19,000

Houdini then said, well, if I had lived back in those times, what would they have thought of me?

And this sort of set off Whitehead.

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01:15:20,000 --> 01:15:30,000

And Whitehead came forward and punched Houdini in the abdomen. And the stories have been on both sides, but two of the witnesses say that Houdini did not invite it or encourage it.

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01:15:32,000 --> 01:15:44,000

Were spiritualists bad enough to commit murder? Yes. Did people believe in spiritualism enough that they would kill for that? Yes.

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01:15:44,000 --> 01:15:57,000

Was Houdini kind of a macho, kawantashog tuffy was? Yes. Can a university student punch wicked hard? Yes.

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01:15:58,000 --> 01:16:09,000

There's all kinds of ways to murder somebody. You can shoot them, stab them, poison them, push them out a window. But who has ever murdered somebody by punching them in the stomach?

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01:16:09,000 --> 01:16:24,000

It doesn't really make sense even by the wildest stretch of the imagination. I don't think Houdini in his final hours was ever under the impression that it had been anything but a terrible accident or misunderstanding.

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01:16:26,000 --> 01:16:36,000

In fact, on his deathbed, Houdini himself ruled it out. He stated to his nurse, Sophia Rosenblatt, that the poor boy didn't mean it.

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01:16:37,000 --> 01:16:49,000

Sophie Rosenblatt's deposition says that in a moment of lucidity, Houdini says very clearly that if the blows were the cause of it, the whitehead didn't know what he was doing.

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01:16:50,000 --> 01:16:56,000

Houdini felt it was an accident, and to hear him say that poor boy is moving.

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01:16:57,000 --> 01:17:07,000

The official cause of death was peritonitis. His appendix hugely inflamed hadn't been operated on in time and had ruptured.

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01:17:09,000 --> 01:17:19,000

The truth is how he died was very simple, and I think it was very difficult for the public and the media to accept it, and they wanted to make something more of it.

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01:17:19,000 --> 01:17:29,000

So it's almost a sort of ridiculous end to this fantastic, magnificent life, and it's hard to accept, but I believe the facts do support that.

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01:17:31,000 --> 01:17:39,000

So should responsibility for the death lie with Houdini himself, allowing himself to be punched when he knew his body was failing him.

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01:17:40,000 --> 01:17:44,000

It seems the desire to cheat death at every turn finally got the better of him.

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01:17:45,000 --> 01:17:55,000

On November 2nd, 1926, people wept openly as Houdini's body was returned to his adopted home city of New York.

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01:17:56,000 --> 01:18:04,000

People turned out, you know, they wanted to get one last look at Houdini, you know, in the box that he'll never escape.

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01:18:05,000 --> 01:18:09,000

It's almost like a state funeral.

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01:18:10,000 --> 01:18:16,000

And it speaks to, A, not just how famous he is, but also how well loved he was.

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01:18:17,000 --> 01:18:29,000

And Harry Houdini's obituary, he was referred to as a scientist, and I'm sure as a young Harry Houdini who had dropped out of school that probably brought a smile to his face.

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01:18:29,000 --> 01:18:38,000

So having delved into the secrets hidden in Houdini's lost diaries, just who was the man behind the mask?

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01:18:39,000 --> 01:18:53,000

I think Houdini was the American dream. He came from almost nothing, and through just grit and hard work and ingenuity and imagination, he did everything in his life he wanted to do.

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01:18:54,000 --> 01:19:04,000

Very few entertainers or performers can become synonymous with their art. His legacy as a performer will live on forever.

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01:19:04,000 --> 01:19:23,000

And it's just so odd that the superstar of the 20th century ended up being a magician, and all we can do is thank God he wasn't a ventriloquist.

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01:19:24,000 --> 01:19:33,000

Houdini's diaries are a chance to probe the mind and personality of the first global celebrity.

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01:19:34,000 --> 01:19:45,000

While he was a complex and uniquely driven man, Houdini succeeded because in the turmoil and change of the 20th century, he gave back to the world a sense of wonder and magic.

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01:19:46,000 --> 01:19:51,000

I'm Lawrence Fishburne. Thank you for watching History's Greatest Mysteries.

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01:19:53,000 --> 01:19:58,000

History's Greatest Mysteries