

1

00:00:00,165 --> 00:00:01,166

Nothing.

2

00:00:03,167 --> 00:00:08,170

This series presents information based in part on theory and conjecture.

3

00:00:10,172 --> 00:00:18,177

The producer's purpose is to suggest some possible explanations, but not necessarily the only ones to the mysteries we will examine.

4

00:00:19,178 --> 00:00:26,182

The Master Mystifier of the Age

5

00:00:26,182 --> 00:00:34,188

Houdini called himself the Master Mystifier of the Age, the undisputed king of handcuffs.

6

00:00:35,188 --> 00:00:37,190

No ropes could bind him.

7

00:00:38,190 --> 00:00:41,192

No icy waters drowned him.

8

00:00:42,193 --> 00:00:49,198

In prison in chains or suspended in straight jackets, Houdini emerged from every restraint.

9

00:00:50,198 --> 00:00:58,204

Though denying he had supernatural powers, he spent his life in pursuit of death and hoped to communicate from beyond the grave.

10

00:00:59,204 --> 00:01:02,206

What were the secrets of the Great Houdini?

11

00:01:02,206 --> 00:01:18,217

The Great Houdini died on Halloween 1926. In death he remains as enigmatic as he was in life.

12

00:01:19,217 --> 00:01:26,222

For years he visited spiritual mediums and seances seeking proof of life after death.

13

00:01:26,222 --> 00:01:32,226

And shortly before he died, he promised to send word from the beyond, if he could.

14

00:01:33,227 --> 00:01:40,231

Houdini was perhaps the best known escape artist of all time. From the beginning he was surrounded by mystery.

15

00:01:41,232 --> 00:01:48,237

Born Eric Weiss in Hungary in 1874, he would later claim Wisconsin as his birthplace.

16

00:01:49,237 --> 00:01:56,242

He was a restless child who rarely slept, his only consolation, the beat of his mother's heart.

17

00:01:59,244 --> 00:02:07,249

It became the driving rhythm of his life, an affirmation that all was well, even through difficult times.

18

00:02:09,251 --> 00:02:14,254

Magic fascinated young Eric and provided escape from a life of hardship.

19

00:02:15,255 --> 00:02:21,259

Already captivated by sleight of hand masters, he happened upon a book that would change his

existence.

20

00:02:22,259 --> 00:02:27,263

The life story and secrets of France's greatest conjurer, Robert Houdin.

21

00:02:28,263 --> 00:02:34,267

Taking Houdin's illusions and adopting his name, Eric became Houdini the magician.

22

00:02:35,268 --> 00:02:44,274

These simple props, now in a museum, were among the first that he could afford as he struggled to survive in an already overcrowded field.

23

00:02:45,275 --> 00:02:50,278

In an attempt to appear successful, he dubbed himself the King of Cards.

24

00:02:53,280 --> 00:02:58,283

While playing beer halls on Coney Island, Harry fell in love with a beautiful young singer.

25

00:02:58,283 --> 00:03:05,288

Her name was Beatrice Runner. Harry called her Bess.

26

00:03:06,289 --> 00:03:11,292

She was part of an act called The Floral Sisters and Just 18.

27

00:03:12,293 --> 00:03:19,297

Although Harry was Jewish and Bess Catholic, their romance blossomed.

28

00:03:19,297 --> 00:03:26,302

Despite her family's objections, within weeks she would become Mrs. Harry Houdini and join his act.

29

00:03:27,302 --> 00:03:35,308

The highlight of their show became a disappearing trick called Metamorphosis, in which Harry and Bess would exchange places inside a bag, inside a trunk, in three seconds.

30

00:03:36,308 --> 00:03:41,312

The film was shot in the morning, and the film was shot in the morning.

31

00:03:41,312 --> 00:03:48,316

Metamorphosis, in which Harry and Bess would exchange places inside a bag, inside a trunk, in three seconds.

32

00:03:49,317 --> 00:03:56,322

Although audiences were intrigued by the illusion, it was not unique, and Harry would continue to seek new tricks.

33

00:03:57,322 --> 00:04:04,327

Handcuff escapes were common entertainment, though the audiences knew that performers used phony cuffs.

34

00:04:05,328 --> 00:04:09,330

But Harry practiced with real ones every night.

35

00:04:10,331 --> 00:04:17,336

He developed a locksmith's mastery of what became a huge collection and could escape from every cuff.

36

00:04:18,336 --> 00:04:23,340

Still, the audiences were unimpressed, so Houdini searched for a more challenging restraint.

37

00:04:24,340 --> 00:04:27,342

He found it in the straight jacket.

38

00:04:29,344 --> 00:04:38,350

After seeing an inmate at an insane asylum struggling futilely in such a device, Houdini was inspired to incorporate the stunt into his act.

39

00:04:39,350 --> 00:04:44,354

This rare piece of film documents his entire escape in less than three minutes.

40

00:05:09,370 --> 00:05:19,377

Yet even with the straight jacket, Houdini's climb to Vondel fame seemed agonizingly slow.

41

00:05:20,378 --> 00:05:25,381

He despaired being at the bottom of the bill, below such acts as the tiniest triplets ever born.

42

00:05:26,382 --> 00:05:30,384

Desperate for publicity, he was a very good actor.

43

00:05:30,384 --> 00:05:36,388

He despaired being at the bottom of the bill, below such acts as the tiniest triplets ever born.

44

00:05:37,389 --> 00:05:42,392

Desperate for publicity, he dared police to try to lock him in their cuffs.

45

00:05:43,393 --> 00:05:45,394

The challenge would become his trademark.

46

00:05:46,395 --> 00:05:51,398

Houdini expert and owner of many of his handcuffs is amateur magician Sid Radner.

47

00:05:52,399 --> 00:05:55,401

Houdini didn't invent the Handcuff Escape Act, but he did perfect it.

48

00:05:55,401 --> 00:06:00,404

Unlike his competitors and the people who preceded him, Houdini took on all comers.

49

00:06:01,405 --> 00:06:08,409

Every sheriff, every chief of police, every deputy, everybody from anywhere could bring in handcuffs, ordinary handcuffs, bring them up in the stage.

50

00:06:09,410 --> 00:06:20,417

They had to be in good working order and as long as they were in good working order, Houdini would accept the challenge and he would proceed to get out of these handcuffs, ordinary handcuffs just as these are here.

51

00:06:21,418 --> 00:06:29,423

Finally, Houdini's skill caught the attention of a major vaudeville booker and he and Best started a national tour.

52

00:06:30,424 --> 00:06:32,425

They were paid \$120 a week.

53

00:06:33,426 --> 00:06:41,431

For publicity, Houdini added jail breaks to his repertoire, allowing police to strip and search him before locking him in a cell.

54

00:06:43,433 --> 00:06:48,436

Minutes later, Houdini would appear free, unfettered and fully clothed.

55

00:06:51,438 --> 00:06:56,441

It was not until he toured Europe that he achieved the fame he had dreamed of.

56

00:06:57,442 --> 00:07:00,444

Success would stretch his tour to four years.

57

00:07:01,445 --> 00:07:04,447

France paid homage to the king of cuffs.

58

00:07:05,447 --> 00:07:12,452

German theaters begged him to extend his tour and in Russia, he freed himself from a Siberian patty wagon.

59

00:07:13,453 --> 00:07:16,455

But escaping from bonds of rope and steel were not enough.

60

00:07:17,455 --> 00:07:22,459

To generate bigger audiences for his stage shows, he risked a drowning death.

61

00:07:33,466 --> 00:07:36,468

Houdini yearned to share his success with his now widowed mother.

62

00:07:37,469 --> 00:07:47,475

So he sent for her in Budapest and giving her a gown designed for the late Queen Victoria presented her like royalty to relatives and old family friends.

63

00:07:49,477 --> 00:07:55,481

Triumphantly, he returned to America as a vaudeville headliner earning \$1,200 a week.

64

00:07:57,482 --> 00:08:04,486

Drumming up business in each new town with increasingly hazard stunts, it now seemed as though nothing could hold him.

65

00:08:06,488 --> 00:08:24,500

It was impossible for audiences to understand how he could survive in a box in the dark underwater for four minutes.

66

00:08:25,500 --> 00:08:32,505

Only the few close to him knew how he picked locks with his toes and even dislocated his joints to escape.

67

00:08:37,508 --> 00:08:48,516

The crowds always wondered if this time Houdini would die. How often did he wonder himself?

68

00:08:52,518 --> 00:08:59,523

Death fascinated him and he would frequently hire a local photographer to take his picture by a famous tombstone.

69

00:09:00,524 --> 00:09:14,533

He even arranged the stunt in which he was buried alive six feet deep. The weight of the earth nearly suffocated him. He swore he'd never attempt it again.

70

00:09:16,534 --> 00:09:25,540

Houdini delighted in convincing his audience he was always just a breath away from death. No stunt achieved that better than the water torture cell.

71

00:09:26,541 --> 00:09:33,546

The audience was allowed to inspect the 100 gallon tank but they could never detect a trick.

72

00:09:34,546 --> 00:09:41,551

Behind a drawn curtain, Houdini would somehow escape and then wait unseen as minutes passed.

73

00:09:42,552 --> 00:09:49,556

When the audience could bear the tension no longer, Houdini would emerge breathless to their immense relief.

74

00:09:50,557 --> 00:09:57,562

Some were so amazed by Houdini's prowess they were sure he possessed paranormal abilities.

75

00:09:58,562 --> 00:10:05,567

Magic expert Walter Gibson discussed this issue with Houdini during their friendship in the 1920s.

76

00:10:06,568 --> 00:10:15,574

The question has been raised about Houdini's approach to the supernatural. Many thought that he had a mediumistic powers himself.

77

00:10:15,574 --> 00:10:23,579

And that he didn't want to advertise that fact so he simply pretended that his escapes were normal things.

78

00:10:24,579 --> 00:10:37,588

So they thought that the reason that he enclosed himself in a cabinet was to get the darkness that would bring spirit aid and that he actually would dematerialize from some of these contraptions in which he'd been placed.

79

00:10:38,589 --> 00:10:48,595

The more successful Houdini became the more his mother was proud of him. Ironically his act grew so popular they rarely saw each other anymore.

80

00:10:49,596 --> 00:10:58,602

When he and Bess set sail for another European tour, Mama came to say her farewell. It was the last time they would see her alive.

81

00:10:59,603 --> 00:11:09,609

Devastated by the loss, Houdini would spend hours by her grave hoping for a word from beyond.

82

00:11:10,610 --> 00:11:16,614

The vigil became an obsession that would change the course of his life.

83

00:11:17,615 --> 00:11:25,620

Houdini entered a period of intense mourning following the death of his mother.

84

00:11:26,621 --> 00:11:31,624

He edged his stationery in black and published elaborate tributes to her.

85

00:11:32,625 --> 00:11:40,630

After a year he recovered from his grief and burst upon the American scene with renewed vigor and purpose.

86

00:11:41,631 --> 00:11:49,636

The public response was greater than ever as Houdini introduced a new twist to his straight jacket

escape.

87

00:11:53,639 --> 00:12:00,643

Although it appeared more dangerous, Houdini would later admit the inverted position made his release simpler.

88

00:12:01,644 --> 00:12:10,650

In city after city his genius for publicity drew huge crowds and packed the theaters night after night.

89

00:12:19,656 --> 00:12:21,657

Movies made his tricks even easier.

90

00:12:21,657 --> 00:12:37,668

Playing characters named Harvey Hanford and Harry Harper, the movies and serials featured the stunts that had made him famous.

91

00:12:37,668 --> 00:12:44,672

Within a few years he formed his own motion picture company.

92

00:12:45,673 --> 00:12:57,681

The theme of his first movie was reincarnation as Houdini comes back to life from an icy arctic grave as the man from beyond.

93

00:13:08,688 --> 00:13:16,694

The plot of the movie nearly caused him disaster at Niagara Falls.

94

00:13:18,695 --> 00:13:24,699

Despite Houdini's safety precautions, the stunt almost killed him and his costar.

95

00:13:38,708 --> 00:13:44,712

There are those who say he encouraged these brushes with death.

96

00:13:45,713 --> 00:13:53,718

Death and what lay beyond would always fascinate Houdini, for this was the barrier that separated him from his beloved mother.

97

00:13:54,719 --> 00:13:57,721

Trying to contact her became an obsession.

98

00:13:58,722 --> 00:14:06,727

During the 1920s spiritualism was widespread giving hope to the living that they could communicate

with the dead.

99

00:14:07,728 --> 00:14:10,730

Houdini was once more prospered in darkened seance rooms.

100

00:14:11,730 --> 00:14:16,734

Sir Arthur Cunnand Doyle, author of Sherlock Holmes, was one of its major advocates.

101

00:14:17,734 --> 00:14:26,740

On tour in England, Houdini accompanied Doyle to over 100 seances, but still no messages came from his beloved mother.

102

00:14:27,741 --> 00:14:35,746

So great was Houdini's distress and disappointment that Lady Doyle volunteered to use her powers to contact the spirit of his mother.

103

00:14:35,746 --> 00:14:43,752

A seance was held and Lady Doyle began writing in a trance, unaware of the words that flowed on to the paper.

104

00:14:44,752 --> 00:14:48,755

Oh my darling, thank God at last I am through.

105

00:14:49,756 --> 00:14:55,759

I want to talk to my boy, my own beloved boy. Now I can rest in peace.

106

00:14:56,760 --> 00:15:01,763

First moved by this demonstration, Houdini later rejected it.

107

00:15:01,763 --> 00:15:10,769

Why was a cross drawn when his mother was Jewish? Why was the letter in English when she spoke only German and Yiddish?

108

00:15:11,770 --> 00:15:14,772

If Lady Doyle couldn't contact her, could anyone?

109

00:15:15,773 --> 00:15:19,775

Walter Gibson recalls Houdini's turn against spiritualism.

110

00:15:20,776 --> 00:15:24,779

Now Houdini respected Cunnand Doyle and he knew there were lots of believers of that type.

111

00:15:24,779 --> 00:15:34,785

But he also knew that psychic matters, spiritualistic seances were studded with fakers and he started out to expose the fakes.

112

00:15:35,786 --> 00:15:38,788

Houdini and Bess knew all the tricks of the spooky trade.

113

00:15:39,789 --> 00:15:48,795

Built in their struggling years as Professor Harry and Mademoiselle Beatrice, they faked spirit writing on a slate and did a phony mind reading act.

114

00:15:48,795 --> 00:15:54,799

Now he attended seances disguised, exposing mediums in the course of their trickery.

115

00:15:55,799 --> 00:16:10,809

Soon he incorporated his debunking into his stage performance, demonstrating how bells were wronged by spirits, how photographic negatives were tampered with to produce ghostly images, and how props were used to fake spirit voices.

116

00:16:10,809 --> 00:16:23,818

Somebody would hold a trumpet, Houdini would stand away from the trumpet and whisper, and they

didn't see a whisper, but they would catch these voices as though they came through the trumpet and he showed how that was done.

117

00:16:24,819 --> 00:16:30,823

He explained several other spiritualistic tricks, but the one that was most impressive was the slate writing.

118

00:16:30,823 --> 00:16:43,831

Houdini showed how a mediums accomplice would exchange a blank slate for one with writing, and how some mediums were so skilled they could write spirit messages with chalk between their toes.

119

00:16:44,832 --> 00:16:55,839

Houdini challenged mediums to prove their claims were real, and so did the prestigious journal The Scientific American, whose publishers asked him to join their investigation committee.

120

00:16:55,839 --> 00:17:08,848

A young medium known as Marjorie claimed to manifest a wide range of psychic phenomena. However, when Houdini devised a special box to prevent her from manipulating objects in the dark, the phenomena ceased.

121

00:17:09,848 --> 00:17:14,852

When she failed to collect the award, Marjorie predicted imminent doom for Houdini.

122

00:17:15,852 --> 00:17:23,858

As he began his September tour in 1926, Houdini himself had the premonition he would never see his home again.

123

00:17:24,858 --> 00:17:43,871

Strangely, Houdini did not die performing a dangerous stunt. While waiting backstage before a show, he was punched in the stomach by a young man who had heard of Houdini's legendary Iron Midriff.

124

00:17:44,872 --> 00:17:55,879

Unfortunately, Houdini was caught off guard and had not prepared himself for the blow. He suffered for a week from a ruptured appendix and peritonitis. He died on Halloween.

125

00:17:57,880 --> 00:18:03,884

Houdini was buried in a coffin he had purchased for his act, a stack of his mother's letters under his head.

126

00:18:04,885 --> 00:18:14,892

Ironically, even though Houdini was proud of all the spiritualist fakery he exposed, he never lost his hope that there was life after death.

127

00:18:15,892 --> 00:18:23,898

While he lay dying, he made a pact with Bess that if it were possible to communicate from the other side, he would do so.

128

00:18:24,898 --> 00:18:37,907

They agreed upon a code that would prove the message was really from him. The words that would reunite them were inspired by the song that had brought them together.

129

00:18:38,908 --> 00:18:40,909

Rosa Bell, Believe

130

00:18:52,917 --> 00:18:56,920

Bess did believe and kept the light of hope burning in their home.

131

00:18:57,920 --> 00:19:01,923

Mediums claimed to make contact with Houdini, but the code words were never right.

132

00:19:02,924 --> 00:19:16,933

Finally, the agreed upon message was produced by psychic Arthur Ford. Bess confirmed it at first, but later discovered there were ways he could have learned the code, ways that were not supernatural.

133

00:19:17,934 --> 00:19:29,941

On Halloween 1936, 10 years after Houdini's death, Bess and a circle of Houdini's friends met in Hollywood for a last seance. The event was recorded.

134

00:19:31,943 --> 00:19:49,955

All thou disembodied spirits, we greet thee. It is the spirit of Houdini we wish to contact. Are you here, Houdini? Please manifest yourself in any way possible. We have waited, Houdini. Oh, so long.

135

00:19:50,955 --> 00:20:00,962

Speak, speak, Harry, in the name of humanity and love, if there is communication from the great beyond, come through with the evidence.

136

00:20:01,963 --> 00:20:04,965

Speak, speak, speak, speak, speak, speak, speak, speak.

137

00:20:07,967 --> 00:20:12,970

The evidence did not come. Bess sadly closed her final seance.

138

00:20:13,971 --> 00:20:29,981

My last hope is gone. I do not believe that Houdini can come back to me or to anyone. The Houdini shrine has burned for 10 years. I now reverently turn out to life.

139

00:20:29,981 --> 00:20:31,983

Good night, Harry.

140

00:20:34,985 --> 00:20:48,994

Buried with Houdini was his hope that he could be contacted after death. Although Bess gave up, there are still those who try to reach him and dream that he may yet be the man from beyond.

141

00:20:49,995 --> 00:21:02,003

Although Houdini's will specified that all his illusions and theatrical props be destroyed after his brother's death, many of them have survived in private collections.

142

00:21:03,003 --> 00:21:10,008

At the Houdini Hall of Fame in Niagara Falls, Canada, two of his challenges still wait to be met.

143

00:21:11,009 --> 00:21:19,014

Since his death more than 50 years ago, no other magician has exactly duplicated his escape from the water torture cell.

144

00:21:20,015 --> 00:21:31,022

And within this envelope is a secret code. So far, no medium has come forth with the precise code words to prove communication with the dead.

145

00:21:32,023 --> 00:21:37,026

No one could be more pleased that the challenges continue than the great Houdini.

146

00:21:45,031 --> 00:21:52,036

Coming up next, agents unraveled the events surrounding the murder of a state prosecutor on FBI, the Untold Stories.

147

00:21:53,036 --> 00:21:58,040

Then history's crimes and trials chronicles the Hollywood crime rampage of Charles Manson and his cult followers.

148

00:21:58,040 --> 00:22:07,046

And later tonight, Hex Factor Week continues on History's Mysteries with a journey into America's psychic past from seances to CIA telepathy.

149

00:22:08,046 --> 00:22:11,048

At 8 here on the History Channel where the past comes alive.