

THE HOUDINI INHERITANCE



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First published in 2024
by Faber & Faber Limited
The Bindery, 51 Hatton Garden
London EC1N 8HN
faber.co.uk

Typeset in Garamond Premier by Typo•glyphix, Burton-on-Trent DE14 3HE
Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

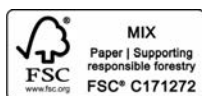
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is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-571-34141-2



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'My brain is the key that sets me free.'
Harry Houdini

PART ONE
THE HANDCUFF KING



1

It was three minutes to eleven on a blustery summer morning, and Harry Houdini was about to jump. All along the seafront gaudy posters promised a ‘death-defying stunt’, which, by the looks of what was happening at the end of our pier, was, for once, no exaggeration. We’d nudged through the crowds, my pal Dennis and me, and positioned ourselves so close to Mr Houdini we were currently able to watch the great man flexing his toes in preparation. For someone so famous he seemed surprisingly small, yet wide and strong like a beer barrel.

‘He doesn’t even look nervous,’ I hissed to Dennis, who should’ve been the one giving *me* the running commentary since he was Harry Houdini’s biggest fan, and had worn his favourite gold-striped waistcoat to mark the occasion.

Unlike Dennis, whose wardrobe was decidedly theatrical, I wore anything my elder sister had grown

out of: today, a sailor-style frock on to which, owing to an argument at the breakfast table, I'd already dripped egg yolk, though I didn't suppose Houdini would notice. Dennis and I were two mere specks in the ocean of people who'd turned up to witness his performance. In every direction the seafront was swarming with summer frocks and eager, sunburnt faces. Most tourists visited Sidford-by-the-Sea for our gritty cockles or a ride on a bad-tempered donkey: it wasn't every day a world-class showman came to town.

Excited as I was, I still had doubts the stunt was humanly possible and had bet Dennis a bag of gobstoppers Mr Houdini wouldn't manage it. The drop from the end of our pier into the grey-blue sea was forty stomach-churning feet. Wearing only swimming trunks and locked in more chains than a dangerous prisoner, Mr Houdini was going to jump in, then free himself in under four minutes. It was, so Dennis had informed me, one of the escapologist's well-known acts.

'Oh, Glory,' he'd said, as if my lack of faith in his hero was to be pitied. 'He's jumped off bridges in Boston and New York loads of times. The man's a genius. 'Course he'll manage it.'

Maybe, but I was a questioner by nature. So we spat on our palms and shook hands to seal the bet.

‘Looking forward to those gobstoppers, Glor,’ Dennis reminded me now, with a playful nudge.

‘You honestly reckon he’ll do it in four minutes, when I’d enough trouble getting out of my bedroom window?’ I answered, showing Dennis the scrape on my elbow to prove it.

It was lucky I’d made it to the seafront at all this morning. When Mum went off to work the summer in New York’s Coney Island with Dennis’s mum Shula, we’d been left under the watchful eyes of his gran and my elder sister Effie. At breakfast, mid boiled egg, Effie had banished me to my room for being ‘sneaky and irresponsible’. It was hardly my fault she noticed the puppy weeing on the floor before I had the chance to explain what it was doing in our kitchen. Especially when I’d been told countless times that I couldn’t have a dog. I’d have to face the music later, but was trying my best to forget it for now.

Meanwhile, on the pier, Houdini’s toes uncurled. It seemed to be a signal to his assistants, who rushed forward to do a last-minute check of his equipment. The chains circling his wrists and ankles were secured by a padlock the size of a football, which must’ve pinched and poked like fury. Houdini didn’t flinch.

‘A minute to go, ladies and gents! Time to shut your

traps!’ hollered local rough Sammy Sykes, who’d been hired to keep control of our part of the crowd.

Dennis and I shared an excited grimace. The crowd’s babbling dropped to a murmur. As Houdini climbed nimbly over the pier’s safety railings, oblivious to the ‘no diving’ notices, I guessed I’d already lost the bet. The patch of water Houdini was aiming for was uncannily deep, and even in summer, swimming there would turn your lips blue and your fingers as white as fish fillets, but he seemed fearless.

The town clock chimed eleven. I tensed. Dennis grinned.

‘Four minutes is an awful long time,’ I reminded him.

‘Not if you’ve trained properly. Divers in the South Pacific can hold their breath for ages,’ he replied knowingly. ‘They make their lungs as small as oranges.’

The thought made me slightly breathless.

‘If anyone can cheat death it’s Houdini, don’t you worry,’ Dennis assured me.

Bets aside, I hoped he was right. A hush fell over the crowd as Mr Houdini began to speak.

‘If . . . I . . . die . . .’ he declared, delivering each word slowly, powerfully, like an actor on the stage. ‘It will be fate and my own foolishness that is to blame.’

A coldness crept over me. Did Houdini expect to die,

then? Dennis didn't think it possible, yet all along the seafront the crowd had fallen eerily silent, as if everyone suddenly realised just how dangerous the trick was. The loudest noise now was the slow slap of water against the pier and the chains clinking as Houdini flexed his arms. He gave a small nod to the two men holding on to him. One of them called out 'Mrs Houdini!' and a tiny woman in a cloche hat appeared, carrying a lap dog under her arm.

'That's his wife, right?' I whispered.

'Yup, Beatrice, Bessie for short.'

'And the dog?'

A glare from Sammy Sykes silenced us before Dennis could reply. I was certain he'd know, though. Dennis's mum was a singer and had many delicious stories about the famous acts who'd crossed her path. When the movie star Rudolph Valentino died suddenly, she knew why and where and how much blood was involved, which was a fat lot more than the newspapers did.

On the seafront the excitement had become electric. I gripped the railings with clammy hands as Mrs Houdini began to count.

'FIVE . . . FOUR . . . THREE . . .' The voice coming out of her tiny frame was surprisingly deep, almost growly.

Mr Houdini flexed his shoulders.

‘TWO.’

The breeze lifted a lock of hair off his face.

‘ONE.’

The men holding Houdini’s arms released their grip. For a split second, he didn’t move. Then all it took was a slight tipping of his upper body and he fell forward, hitting the sea with a great crack.

‘Ouch! Bet that hurt,’ I muttered under my breath.

The water swirled white, fizzing and hissing and swallowing Houdini before turning grey-blue again.

He was gone. Dennis and I leaned a little further over the railings to see where and when Houdini would appear. Twenty... thirty... I tried counting in my head, but it seemed ages before the man keeping time declared:

‘ONE MINUTE!’

The more I stared at the sea beneath the pier, the more my eyes started to play tricks on me, turning every ripple, every dip and swell into Houdini’s wet head emerging. I began feeling uneasy when he still didn’t surface.

‘TWO MINUTES!’

Now Dennis looked nervous too.

‘TWO MINUTES THIRTY SECONDS!’

It felt like years. I kept picturing the thick chains criss-crossing Houdini’s body, running from his wrists

to his ankles, everything held in place by that enormous padlock. And his tiny, orange-sized lungs screaming out for air.

‘Shouldn’t he have done it by now?’ I whispered.

‘Depends.’

‘On *what*?’ The frown on Dennis’s face filled me with dread. Much as I wanted to win our argument, I didn’t want Mr Houdini to die.

‘THREE MINUTES!’

The crowd hadn’t moved. It was as if we were all holding our breath alongside Houdini. I felt dizzy and tight in my chest.

The next second, Mrs Houdini was rushing to the pier’s edge, the people around her shouting orders, throwing ropes into the water, readying blankets and – I noted ominously – a stretcher. Everyone was pointing down at the sea. Mrs Houdini ran from one side of the pier to the other.

Something must’ve happened just out of sight because the entire seafront then erupted into a roaring cheer.

‘Hoorah!’

‘He’s done it!’

‘Unbelievable!’

Houdini, it seemed, had succeeded in getting free.

Relieved, I took a huge gulp of air. Dennis flashed me a winner's grin.

Yet to our frustration, all we could see were hats being hurled into the sky. Directly in front of us we faced a wall of shoulders as people surged forward for a view down on to the beach.

'Excuse me!' I cried, desperate to see. When no one moved, I groaned loudly. 'Ugh, watch out! I'm about to be sick—' and like magic, a path opened up before us.

It was enough to see a figure staggering across the wet sand, dragging behind him a train of ropes and chains. His assistants surrounded him. Members of the public who tried to climb down on to the beach were instructed, very firmly, to keep back, to give Houdini space. One person who did manage to get a little too close was pushed roughly to the ground and promptly sat on. Houdini's assistants meant business.

As we watched it all, eyes on stalks, the town band struck up a dizzyingly fast version of 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow'. Another great cheer went up as Mrs Houdini, dog still under her arm, tottered on to the beach to congratulate her husband, who was on his knees, coughing up goodness knows what. My own chest squeezed in sympathy.

‘Mrs Houdini’s dog is *so* cute,’ I murmured as we watched.

Dennis laughed. ‘You’ve just witnessed the most amazing escape act, and all you think about is the *dog*?!’

‘True, he was brilliant – Houdini, I mean. Can’t imagine how he did it.’

‘He probably got free straight away, then stayed underwater to make it more dramatic,’ said Dennis, virtually swooning in admiration. ‘He’ll have trained for months to get it right.’

I shuddered. No amount of training would make me stay underwater that long. Nor did it explain how the trick was done. And this was what intrigued me.

‘Do you think he keeps the key in his mouth?’ I wondered.

Dennis shook his head. ‘You heard him speak at the start.’

‘He must pick the lock, then, mustn’t he?’

‘That, Glory, is the million-dollar question.’

‘You mean you don’t know?’

‘No one does, though not for want of trying. It’s all top secret.’

‘You must have *some* idea, Den, a superfan like you,’ I remarked.

‘I think it’s probably magic,’ he confessed. ‘Stuff no one else could do if they tried.’

‘Hmmm.’ I wasn’t convinced. But without proof, and not wanting to offend Dennis, I kept quiet.

Now the show was over, the crowd began to move towards the tea shops and amusement kiosks that lined the promenade. I had a lost bet to honour, but on checking my pocket, found only a couple of pennies and a dog biscuit.

‘It might not be a whole bag of gobstoppers,’ I warned as we approached the sweet shop.

‘That’s all right.’ Dennis tucked his arm through mine. ‘You know, Glory, the satisfaction of winning is the *best* prize.’

I laughed. ‘You’re a chump, you are.’

I was glad to see Dennis back in good spirits. These past few weeks we’d both been a bit lost without our mums, Dennis especially. If I had a complaint about him it would be his tendency to be *too* cheerful, especially early in the mornings. But without Shula he’d been as gloomy as I’d ever seen him. His closeness with his mum was, I confess, something I was envious of. Yet though my mum wasn’t as showy with her affections, I did miss her – not least because she was good at keeping my bossy sister in check. Having Effie in charge was like being in

school detention every day *before* you'd done anything wrong. Admittedly, this morning's business with the puppy probably hadn't helped, and I realised now that bringing a dog home before I'd asked permission wouldn't change my family's no to a yes.

Still, I told myself firmly, if Houdini could defy death, then I could certainly face my sister.