

## The Riddle of Houdini

**W**HO WAS THE GREATEST medium-baiter of modern times? Undoubtedly Houdini.

Who was the greatest physical medium of modern times? There are some who would be inclined to give the same answer. I do not see how it can ever now be finally and definitely proved, but circumstantial evidence may be very strong, as Thoreau said when he found a trout in the milk jug. I foresee that the subject will be debated for many years to come, so perhaps my opinion, since I knew him well, and always entertained this possibility in my mind, may be of interest. If others add their experience in order to support or disprove my own surmises, then some result may eventually be obtained.

I will first give some of my own personal impressions of Houdini; I will then dwell on some phases of his career, which show his singular character, and I will then endeavour to give the argument as to the source of his unique powers.

Let me say, in the first instance, that in a long life which has touched every side of humanity, Houdini is far and away the most curious and intriguing character whom I have ever encountered. I have met better men, and I have certainly met very many worse ones, but I have never met a man who had such strange contrasts in his nature, and whose actions and motives it was more difficult to foresee or to reconcile.

I will first, as is only proper, dwell upon the great good that lay in his nature. He had the essential masculine quality of courage to a supreme degree. Nobody has ever done, and nobody in all human probability will ever do, such reckless feats of daring. His whole life was one long succession of them, and when I say that amongst them was the leaping from one aeroplane to another, with handcuffed hands at the height of three thousand feet, one can form an idea of the extraordinary lengths that he would go. In this, however, as in much more that concerned him, there was a certain psychic element that he was ready to admit freely. He

told me that a voice, which was independent of his own reason or judgment, told him what to do and how to do it. So long as he obeyed the voice he was assured of safety. "It all comes as easy as stepping off a log," said he to me, "but I have to wait for the voice. You stand there before a jump, swallowing the yellow stuff that everyman has in him. Then at last you hear the voice and you jump. Once I jumped on my own and I nearly broke my neck." This was the nearest admission that I ever had from him that I was right in thinking that there was a psychic element which was essential to every one of his feats.

Apart from his amazing courage, he was remarkable for his cheery urbanity in every-day life. One could not wish a better companion so long as one was with him, though he might do and say the most unexpected things when one was absent. He was, like most Jews, estimable in his family relationships. His love for his dead mother seemed to be the ruling passion of his life, which he expressed on all sorts of public occasions in a way which was, I am sure, sincere, but is strange to our colder Western blood.

There were many things in Houdini which were as Oriental as there were in our own Disraeli. He was devoted also to his wife, and with good reason, for she was as devoted to him, but again his intimacy showed itself in unconventional ways. When in his examination before the Senatorial Committee he was hard-pressed by some defender of Spiritualism who impugned his motives in his violent and vindictive campaign against mediums, his answer was to turn to his wife and to say, "I have always been a good boy, have I not?"

Another favourable side of his character was his charity. I have heard, and am quite prepared to believe, that he was the last refuge of the down-and-outer, especially if he belonged to his own profession of showman. This charity extended even beyond the grave, and if he heard of any old magician whose tombstone needed repair he took it upon himself at once to set the matter right. Willie Davenport in Australia, Bosco in Germany, and many others of his profession were the objects of these pious offices. Whatever he did was done upon a large scale. He had many pensioners whom he did not know by sight. One man embraced

him in the street, and upon Houdini angrily demanding who the devil he was, he answered, "Why, I am the man whose rent you have paid for the last ten years." He was devoted to children, though he had none of his own. He was never too busy to give a special free performance for the youngsters. At Edinburgh he was so shocked at the bare feet of the kiddies that he had them all into the theatre, and fitted them then and there with five hundred pairs of boots. He was the greatest publicity agent that ever lived, so that it is not ill natured to surmise that the local papers had been advised beforehand, and that the advertisement was well worth it. There were other occasions, however, when his charity was less ostentatious. Animals too were loved by him, and he had a peculiar talent for taming them and teaching them tricks. All these ingredients in one impulsive personality surely make up a very lovable man. It is true that his generosity was curiously mixed with frugality, so that even while he was giving away his earnings at a rate which alarmed his wife, he would put an indignant comment in his diary because he had been charged two shillings for the pressing of his clothes.

So much for his virtues – and most of us would be very glad to have as goodly a list. But all he did was extreme, and there was something to be placed in the other scale.

A prevailing feature of his character was a vanity which was so obvious and childish that it became more amusing than offensive. I can remember, for example, that when he introduced his brother to me, he did it by saying, "This is the brother of the great Houdini." This without any twinkle of humour and in a perfectly natural manner.

This enormous vanity was combined with a passion for publicity which knew no bounds, and which must at all costs be gratified. There was no consideration of any sort that would restrain him if he saw his way to an advertisement. Even when he laid flowers upon the graves of the dead it was in the prearranged presence of the local photographers.

It was this desire to play a constant public part that had a great deal to do with his furious campaign against Spiritualism. He knew that the public took a keen interest in the matter, and that there was unlimited publicity to be had from it. He

perpetually offered large sums to any medium who would do this or that, knowing well that even in the unlikely event of the thing being done he could always raise some objection and get out of it. Sometimes his tactics were too obvious to be artistic. In Boston he arrived by prearrangement before a great crowd at the City Hall and walked solemnly up the steps with ten thousand dollars' worth of stock in his hand, which represented one of his perennial stakes against phenomena. This was in connection with his engagement on a tour of the music halls.

His favourite argument, and that of many of his fellow-conjurors, was this flourishing of dollar-wads. It is obviously absurd, since the money will only be paid if you satisfy the challenger, and since the challenger has to pay the money he naturally never will be satisfied. The classical instance is that of the 'Scientific American magazine,' which offered a large sum for any well-attested psychic phenomenon, but on being confronted with the Crandon phenomena, which are perhaps the best attested in the whole annals of psychical research, found reasons for withholding the money. I remember that when I arrived in New York, Houdini offered some huge sum that he could do anything which I had ever seen a medium do. I at once accepted his challenge, and proposed as a test that he should materialize the face of my mother in such a way that others besides myself who had known her in life could recognize it. I heard no more of the matter after that, and yet in England a medium had actually done this. I would have brought my witnesses across the Atlantic had the test been accepted.

I am quite prepared to think that Houdini's campaign against mediums did temporary good so far as false mediums goes, but it was so indiscriminate and accompanied by so much which was intolerant and offensive that it turned away the sympathy and help which Spiritualists who are anxious for the cleanliness of their own movement, would gladly have given him. The unmasking of false mediums is our urgent duty, but when we are told that, in spite of our own evidence and that of three generations of mankind, there are no real ones we lose interest, for we know that we are speaking to an ignorant man. At the same time, the States, and in a lesser degree our own people do need stern supervision.

I admit that I underrated the corruption in the States. What first brought it home to me was that my friend Mrs. Crandon told me that she had received price lists from some firm which manufactures fraudulent instruments for performing tricks. If such a firm can make a living, there must be some villainy about, and a more judicious Houdini might well find a useful field of activity. It is these hyenas who retard our progress. I have myself had a hand in exposing more than one of them.

There was a particular Hall in Boston which Houdini used for his tirades against the spirits. Some weeks after his campaign a curious and disagreeable phenomenon broke out there. Showers of gravel or of small pebbles fell continually among the audience, and several people suffered minor injuries. A police watch was kept up for some time, and eventually it was shown that a staid employee, whose record was an excellent one, was in the habit, without rhyme or reason, of stealing up to the gallery and throwing these missiles down into the stalls. When tried for the offence he could only say that a senseless but overpowering impulse caused him to do it. Many psychic students would be prepared to consider that the incident would bear the interpretation of a poltergeist on the one side and an obsession on the other.

There was another incident at Boston of a very much more serious kind, and one which bears out my assertion that where there was an advertisement to be gained Houdini was a dangerous man. The remarkable psychic powers of Mrs. Crandon, the famous "Margery," were at that time under examination by the committee of the 'Scientific American' Various members of this committee had sat many times with the Crandons, and some of them had been completely converted to the psychic explanation, while others, though unable to give any rational explanation of the phenomena, were in different stages of dissent. It would obviously be an enormous feather in Houdini's cap if he could appear on the scene and at once solve the mystery. What a glorious position to be in! Houdini laid his plans and was so sure of success that before going to Boston he wrote a letter, which I saw, to a mutual friend in London, announcing that he was about to expose her. He would have done it, too, had it not been for an interposition which was miraculous. I think well enough of Houdini

to hope that he would have held his hand if he could have realized the ruin and disgrace which his success would have brought upon his victims. As it was, the thought of the tremendous advertisement swallowed up his scruples. All America was watching, and he could not resist the temptation.

He had become familiar in advance with the procedure of the Crandon circle, and with the types of phenomena. It was easy for him to lay his plans. What he failed to take into account was that the presiding spirit, Walter, the dead brother of Mrs. Crandon, was a very real and live entity, who was by no means inclined to allow his innocent sister to be made the laughing stock of the continent. It was the unseen Walter who checkmated the carefully laid plans of the magician. The account of what occurred I take from the notes which were taken by the circle at the time. The first phenomenon to be tested was the ringing of an electric bell which could only be done by pressing down a flap of wood, well out of the reach of the medium. The room was darkened, but the bell did not ring. Suddenly the angry voice of Walter was heard.

“You have put something to stop the bell ringing, Houdini, you ...” he cried.

Walter has a wealth of strong language and makes no pretence at all to be a very elevated being. They all have their use over there. On this occasion, at least, the use was evident, for when the light was turned up, there was the rubber from the end of a pencil stuck into the angle of the flap in such a way as to make it impossible that it could descend and press the bell. Of course, Houdini professed complete ignorance as to how it got there, but who else had the deft touch to do such a thing in the dark, and why was it only in his presence that such a thing occurred? It is clear that if he could say afterwards, when he had quietly removed the rubber, that his arrival had made all further trickery impossible, he would have scored the first trick in the game.

He should have taken warning and realized that he was up against powers which were too strong for him, and which might prove dangerous if provoked too far. But the letters he had written and boasts he had made cut off his retreat. The second night

landed him in a very much worse mess than the first one. He had brought with him an absurd box which was secured in front by no fewer than eight padlocks. One would have thought that it was a gorilla rather than a particularly gentle lady who was about to be confined within. The forces behind Margery showed what they thought of this contraption by bursting the whole front open the moment Margery was fastened into it. This very unexpected development Houdini endeavoured to explain away, but he found it difficult to give a reason why, if the box was so vulnerable, it was worth while to bring it with so much pomp and ceremony, with eight padlocks and many other gadgets, all the way from New York to Boston.

However, much worse was to come. The lady was put into the reconstituted box, her arms protruding through holes on each side Houdini was observed without any apparent reason to pass his hand along the lady's arm, and so into the box. Presently, after some experiments, the lady's arms were placed inside and the attempt was to be made to ring the bell-box while only her head projected. Suddenly the terrible Walter intervened.

"Houdini, you ... blackguard!" he thundered. "You have put a rule into the cabinet. You ...! Remember, Houdini, you won't live forever. Someday you've got to die."

The lights were turned on, and, shocking to relate, a two-foot folding rule was found lying in the box. It was a most deadly trick, for, of course, if the bell had rung Houdini would have demanded a search of the cabinet, the rule would have been found, it would, if held between the teeth, have enabled the medium to have reached and pressed down the flap of the bell-box, and all America would have resounded next day with the astuteness of Houdini and the proven villainy of the Crandons. I do not think that even the friends of the latter could have got over the patent facts. It was the most dangerous moment of their career, and only Walter saved them from ruin.

For the moment Houdini was completely overcome, and cowered, as well he might, before the wrath of the unseen. His offence was so obvious that no better excuse occurred to him, when he had rallied his senses, than that the rule had been left there by accident by some subordinate. When one considers, however,

that no other tool upon earth, neither a hammer, a chisel, nor a wrench, but only a folding two-foot rule, could have sustained the charge, one realizes how hopeless was his position. But one of Houdini's characteristics was that nothing in this world or then ext could permanently abash him. He could not suggest that they were guilty considering that the Crandons had actually asked to have the cabinet examined after she had entered, and Houdini had refused. Yet, incredible as it may seem, he had his advertisement after all, for he flooded America with a pamphlet to say that he had shown that the Crandons were frauds, and that he had in some unspecified way exposed them. Since the cabinet had become a delicate subject his chief accusation was that Mrs. Crandon had in some way rung the bell-box by stretching out her foot. He must have known, though his complaisant audiences did not, that the bell-box was continually rung while some sitter was permitted to hold it in his hands, and even to rise and to walk about with it.

Speaking with a full knowledge, I say that this Boston incident was never an exposure of Margery, but it was a very real exposure of Houdini, and is a most serious blot upon his career.

To account for the phenomena he was prepared to assert that not only the doctor, but that even members of the committee were in senseless collaboration with the medium. The amazing part of the business was that other members of the committee seemed to have been overawed by the masterful conjurer, and even changed their very capable secretary, Mr. Malcolm Bird, at his behest. Mr. Bird, it may be remarked, with a far better brain than Houdini, and with a record of some fifty séances, had by this time been entirely convinced of the truth of the phenomena.

It may seem unkind that I should dwell upon these matters now that Houdini has gone to his account, but what I am writing now I also published during his lifetime. I deal gently with the matter, but I have to remember that its importance far transcends any worldly consideration, and that the honour of the Crandons is still impugned in many minds by the false charges which were not only circulated in print, but were shouted by Houdini from the platforms of a score of music-halls with a violence which browbeat and overbore every protest from the friends of truth.



Houdini did not yet realize the gravity of his own actions, or the consequences which they entailed. The Crandons are themselves the most patient and forgiving people in the world, treating the most irritating opposition with a good-humoured and amused tolerance. But there are other forces which are beyond human control, and from that day the shadow lay heavy upon Houdini. His anti-Spiritualist agitation became more and more unreasoning until it bordered upon a mania which could only be explained in some quarters by supposing that he was in the pay of certain clerical fanatics, an accusation which I do not believe. It is true that in order to preserve some show of reason he proclaimed that he wished only to attack dishonest mediums, but as in the same breath he would assert that there were no honest ones, his moderation was more apparent than real. If he had consulted the reports of the National Association of American Spiritualists he would have found that this representative body was far more efficient in exposing those swindlers than he had ever been, for they had the necessary experience by which the true can be separated from the false.

I suppose that at that time Houdini was, from an insurance point of view, so far as bodily health goes, the best life of his age in America. He was in constant training, and he used neither alcohol nor tobacco. Yet all over the land warnings of danger arose. He alluded in public to the matter again and again. In my own home circle I had the message some months before his death, "Houdini is doomed, doomed, doomed!" So seriously did I take this warning that I would have written to him had I the least hope that my words could have any effect. I knew, however, by previous experience, that he always published my letters, even the most private of them, and that it would only give him a fresh pretext for ridiculing that which I regard as a sacred cause.

But as the months passed and fresh warnings came from independent sources, both I and, as I believe, the Crandons, became seriously alarmed for his safety. He was, on one side of his character, so fine a fellow that even those who were attacked in this monstrous way were unwilling that real harm should befall him. But he continued to rave, and the shadow continued to thicken. I have an American friend who writes in the press

under the name of Samri Frikell. He is really Fulton Oursler, the distinguished novelist, whose book 'Step-child of the Moon' is, in my judgment, one of the best of recent romances. Oursler was an intimate friend of Houdini, and he has allowed me to quote some of his experiences.

"You know him as well as I do," writes Oursler. "You knew the immense vanity of the man. You know that he loved to be important. My experience with him for the last three months of his life was most peculiar. He would call me on the telephone at seven o'clock in the morning and he would be in a quarrelsome mood. He would talk for an hour telling me how important he was and what a great career he was making. In his voice was a hysterical, almost feminine, note of rebellion, as if his hands were beating against an immutable destiny.

"In all these cases Houdini portrayed to me a clear sense of impending doom. This is not an impression which I have received subsequent to his death. But I commented upon it at the time. I believe that Houdini sensed the coming of his death, but did not know that it meant death. He didn't know what it meant, but he hated it and his soul screamed out indignation."

Some time later he telephoned to the same friend in a way which showed that his surmise had become more definite. "I am marked for death," said he. "I mean that they are predicting my death in spirit circles all over the country." At that time he was starting in perfect health upon that tour of the Vaudevilles which was destined to be the last of his career. Within a few weeks he was dead.

The details of that death were in many ways most singular. On October 11th he had a painful but, as everyone thought, an unimportant accident, when during his performance his ankle sustained an injury. The incident was treated quite lightly by the Press, but was regarded more seriously by those who had other sources of information. On October 13th, two days after the accident, the gentleman already quoted had a letter from a medium, Mrs. Wood.

"Three years ago," said this ill-omened epistle, "the spirit of Dr. Hyslop said, 'The waters are black for Houdini', and he foretold that disaster would befall him while performing before an

audience in a theatre. Dr. Hyslop now says that the injury is more serious than has been reported, and that Houdini's days as a magician are over."

The sad prophecy proved to be only too true, though the injured leg was only the prelude of worse disaster. It seemed indeed to be a sign that the protective mantle which had been around him had for some reason been withdrawn. The ankle continued to pain him, though he managed for some weeks to give his accustomed show. At Montreal a member of the audience rose to protest against the violence with which he raved against Spiritualism, and very particularly against me. Such personal attacks were not to be taken too seriously; for it was part of his perfervid nature that anyone who had experiences which differed from his own was either a dupe or a scoundrel. He bore up with great bravery against the pain from which he must have continually suffered, but in less than a fortnight, while on the stage at Detroit, he completely collapsed, and was carried to that hospital from which he never emerged alive.

There were some remarkable points about his death. It seems that upon Friday, October 22nd, he was lying in his dressing room, reading his letters. It was about five in the afternoon. He had lectured at McGill University a few days before, and with his usual affability he allowed some of the students to come in and see him. What followed may be taken verbatim from the report of one of these young men.

"Houdini,' he says, 'was facing us and lying down on a couch at the time reading some mail, his right side nearest us.' This first-year student engaged Houdini more or less continually in a conversation whilst my friend Mr. Smilovitch continued to sketch Houdini. This student was the first to raise the question of Houdini's strength. My friend and I were not so much interested in his strength as we were in his mental acuteness, his skill, his beliefs and his personal experiences. Houdini stated that he had extraordinary muscles in his forearms, in his shoulders and in his back, and he asked all of us present to feel them, which we did.

"The first-year McGill student asked Houdini whether it was true that punches in the stomach did not hurt him. Houdini

remarked rather unenthusiastically that his stomach could resist much, although he did not speak of it in superlative terms. Thereupon he gave Houdini some very hammer-like blows below the belt, first securing Houdini's permission to strike him. Houdini was reclining at the time with his right side nearest Whitehead, and the said student was more or less bending over him. These blows fell on that part of the stomach to the right of the navel, and were struck on the side nearest us, which was in fact Houdini's right side; I do not remember exactly how many blows were struck. I am certain, however, of at least four very hard and severe body blows, because at the end of the second or third blow I verbally protested against this sudden onslaught on the part of this first-year student, using the words, 'Hey there. You must be crazy, what are you doing?' or words to that effect, but Whitehead continued striking Houdini with all his strength.

"Houdini stopped him suddenly in the midst of a punch, with a gesture that he had had enough. At the time Whitehead was striking Houdini, the latter looked as though he was in extreme pain and winced as each blow was struck.

"Houdini immediately after stated that he had had no opportunity to prepare himself against the blows, as he did not think that Whitehead would strike him as suddenly as he did and with such force, and that he would have been in a better position to prepare for the blows if he had arisen from his couch for this purpose, but the injury to his foot prevented him from getting about rapidly."

There is no doubt that the immediate cause of the death was ruptured appendix, and it was certified as traumatic appendicitis by all three doctors who attended him. It is, however, a very rare complaint, one of the doctors asserting that he had never seen a case before. When one considers how often boxers are struck violent blows in this region, one can understand that it is not usually so vulnerable. From the time that he reached hospital he seems to have known that he was doomed.

Even after death strange things continued to happen which seem to be beyond the range of chance or coincidence. Some little time before Houdini had ordered a very ornate coffin, which he proposed to use in some sensational act. He paid no less than

two thousand five hundred dollars for it. The idea was, I believe, to have a glass face to it and to exhibit the magician within it after it was hermetically sealed up, for he had shown in a previous experiment an inexplicable capacity for living without air. He carried this coffin about with him in one of the very numerous crates in which all his apparatus was packed. After his death all his goods were, I am told, sent on to New York. It was found, however, that by some blunder one box had been left behind. On examination this was found to contain the show coffin, which was accordingly used for his burial. At that burial some curious and suggestive words were used by the presiding rabbi, Barnard Drachman. He said: "Houdini possessed a wondrous power that he never understood, and which he never revealed to anyone in life." Such an expression coming at so solemn a moment from one who may have been in a special position to know must show that my speculations are not extravagant or fantastic when I deal with the real source of those powers. The rabbi's speech is to be taken with Houdini's own remark, when he said to my wife: "There are some of my feats which my own wife does not know the secret of." A famous Chinese conjurer who saw him perform said, "This is not a trick, it is a gift." He frequently said that his work would die with him, and he has left no legacy of it so far as can be seen, though it would clearly be a very valuable asset. What can cover all these facts, save that there was some element in his power which was peculiar to himself, and that could only point to a psychic element – in a word, that he was a medium?

In the remarkable ceremony performed beside his coffin by his brother-magicians, the spokesman broke a symbolic wand and said: "The wand is broken. God touched him with a wondrous gift, and our brother used it. Now the wand is broken." It may indeed have been not mere trickery but a God-given gift, which raised Houdini to such a height. And why should he not use it, if it were indeed the gift of God? I see no reason why the medium, like other God-endowed men – the painter, the poet, or the romancer – should not earn money and renown by his gift. Let him hesitate, however, before he makes rash attacks upon those who are using the same gift, and for higher ends.

Other curious points, which may possibly come within the

range of coincidence, are connected with the death of Houdini. For example, there was a Mr. Gysel, who had shared in Houdini's views as to Spiritualism. He wrote thus to my friend:

“MR. FRIKELL – “Something happened to me in my room on Sunday night, October 24th, 1926, 10.58: Houdini had given me a picture of himself which I had framed and hung on the wall. At the above time and date the picture fell to the ground, breaking the glass. I now know that Houdini will die. Maybe there is something in these psychic phenomena after all.”

To this Mr. “Frikell” adds:

“As I think back on my own experience I am inclined to agree maybe there is indeed something to the psychic phenomena after all.”

His admission is the more noteworthy as I remember the day when he was a strong and intelligent opponent.

I will now turn to a consideration of the nature of Houdini's powers, and in order to appreciate the argument one has to consider the nature of some of the feats which he did actually perform. A list of these would make a considerable pamphlet, but a few typical ones may be selected. A general outline of his life, too, may not be out of place.

Houdini's real name was Eric Weiss, and he was born in 1874, in the State of Wisconsin, in one of those small towns which seem to be the real centres of American originality. He was the seventh son of a Jewish rabbi, and he has left it on record that his mother did not even know the English language. He has also left it on record that in his early youth he had some connection with mediumship, though of a most doubtful variety. He has not scrupled to confess that he eked out any powers he may have had by the expedient of reading the names upon the graves in the local cemeteries. It was a good deal later than this that he first met a true medium in the shape of Ira Davenport, the only survivor of the famous brothers whose powers amazed all England in the 'sixties, and who, in spite of all the interested claims of Maskelyne and other conjurers, were never exposed, nor even adequately imitated. I have before me as I write a letter from Houdini himself, in which he tells me:

“I was an intimate friend of Ira Erastus Davenport. I can make

the positive assertion that the Davenport Brothers never were exposed. I know more about the Davenports than anyone living.”

He then adds the very curious and notable sentence:

“I know for a fact that it was not necessary for them to remove their bonds in order to obtain manifestations.”

When one considers that these bonds were often handcuffs or twisted copper wire, and that the manifestations occurred in many cases within a few seconds of the closing of the cabinet, this admission by one, who claims that he knows, is of very great importance. We will return to this later, after we have enumerated a few of his results.

He could, and continually did, walk straight out of any prison cell in which he might be confined. They placed him at Washington in the cell in which Guiteau, the murderer of Garfield, had been locked, but he readily emerged. In the letter from which I have already quoted, he says to me:

“I pledge my word of honour that I was never given any assistance, nor was in collusion with anyone.”

This was clearly the case, for he performed the feat many times indifferent places, and was always searched to prove that he had no tools in his possession. Sometimes the grinning warders had hardly got out of the passage before their prisoner was at their heels. It takes some credulity, I think, to say that this was, in the ordinary sense of the word, a trick.

Handcuffs might have been made of jelly, so easily did his limbs pass through them. He was heavily manacled at Scotland Yard, and placed behind a screen from over which a shower of manacles began to fall until he stepped out a free man. These things he could do in an instant. When I was lecturing at the Carnegie Hall in New York, my wife and Houdini walked down some side corridor after the lecture in order to rejoin me. They came to a padlocked door, and my wife was about to turn back. To her amazement, her companion put out his hand and picked off the locked padlock as one picks a plum from a tree. Was that a trick, or are all these talks about sleight of hand what Houdini himself would call “bunk” or “hokum”?

When Houdini was in Holland, he got the local basket makers to weave a basket round him. Out of this he emerged. He was

shut up later in a sealed paper bag and came out, leaving it intact. A block of ice was frozen round his body and he burst his way out. One who has attempted to bring his feats within the range of normal explanations tells us that he did this by “depressing his periphery as a prelude to dynamic expansion” – whatever that may mean. He was also buried six feet deep in California and emerged unhurt, though we are not told by what dynamic expansion the feat was achieved.

In Leeds he was coopered up in a cask by the brewers, but he was soon out. At Krupps’ he defied the whole management, who constructed a special set of fetters for his behoof. They had no better luck than the others. He was put into the Siberian convict van at Moscow, but walked straight out of it. On December 2nd, 1906, he leaped from the Old BelleIsle Bridge at Detroit heavily handcuffed, and released himself under icy water, which would paralyse any man’s limbs, On August 26th, 1907, he was thrown into San Francisco Bay with his hands tied behind his back and seventy-five pounds of ball and chain attached to his body. He was none the worse. He escaped from a padlocked United States mailbag, as many a parcel has done before him. Finally, he was manacled, tied up in a box, and dropped into the East River at New York, but lived to tell the tale.

Whatever may have been the true source of Houdini’s powers – and I am not prepared to be dogmatic upon the point – I am very sure that the explanations of his fellow-conjurers do not always meet the case. Thus we have Mr. Harry Kellock, to whose book I am indebted for much supplementary information, talking persuasively about the magician’s skill with a picklock. He had told reporters that his method was to have a small instrument which was concealed by surgeon’s plaster upon the sole of his foot. This would certainly seem to be very useful when he was lowered in a coffin to the bottom of the sea!

Of course, I am aware that Houdini really was a very skilful conjurer. All that could be known in that direction he knew. Thus he confused the public mind by mixing up things which were dimly within their comprehension with things which were beyond anyone’s comprehension. I am aware also that there is a box trick, and that there is a normal handcuff and bag trick.



But these are not in the same class with Houdini's work. I will believe they are when I see one of these other gentlemen thrown in a box off London Bridge. One poor man in America actually believed these explanations, and on the strength of them jumped in a weighted packing case into a river in the Middle West; and one did so in Germany. They are there yet!

To show the difference between Houdini's methods and those by which the box trick is done by other conjurers, I will give a description of the latter by one who has all normal tricks at his finger-ends. He says:

"While the air-holes are there for ventilation they are there for another purpose, and that is that the man inside may get a catch or grip of that particular board. The first thing that is done by the man inside is to put his back up against the side next the audience and with his feet force off the board with the air holes in it. After freeing this board, with a bit of string he lowers this board to the floor. If any obstruction comes in the way in the shape of a nail which he cannot force with his concealed lever and hammer, he cuts the nail with a fine saw. Thus his escape. The ropes are only a blind, as quite sufficient room can be got to get out between ropes. The procedure to close up again is simple. The iron nails are placed back upon the holes from which they were forced and squeezed in and knocked with a leather-covered hammer."

Such is the usual technique as described by an expert. Does anyone believe that all this could be done as I have seen Houdini do it in a little over a minute, or could one imagine it being carried out at the bottom of a river? I contend that Houdini's performance was on an utterly different plane, and that it is an outrage against common sense to think otherwise.

I will now take a single case of Houdini's powers, and of the sort of thing that he would say, in order to show the reader what he is up against if he means to maintain that these tricks had no abnormal element. The description is by my friend, Captain Bartlett, himself a man of many accomplishments, psychic and otherwise. In the course of their conversation he said to his guest:

"How about your box trick?"

"Instantly his expression changed. The sparkle left his eyes

and his face looked drawn and haggard. 'I cannot tell you,' he said, in a low, tense voice. 'I don't know myself, and, what is more, I have always a dread lest I should fail, and then I would not live. I have promised Mrs. Houdini to give up the box trick at the end of the season, for she makes herself ill with anxiety, and for myself I shall be relieved too.'

"He stooped to stroke our cats, and to our amazement they fled from the room with their tails in the air, and for some minutes they dashed wildly up and down stairs, scattering the mats in all directions.

"After this we had an earnest talk on psychic phenomena, and he told me of strange happenings to himself, especially at the grave of his mother, to whom he was deeply attached.

"The trunk-makers of Bristol had made a challenge box from which he was billed to escape that evening. He begged me to be with him, explaining that he liked the support of a sensitive, more especially as he was feeling anxious.

"I willingly agreed, the more especially as he allowed me to bring a very observant friend, a civil engineer of repute.

"The box was made of inch planking, tongued and grooved, with double thickness at the ends. It was nailed herringbone fashion, three-inch nails, and three inches apart. Several auger holes were made at one end to admit air, and the whole thing was carefully and solidly finished. It was, as I have said, a challenge box, yet we thoroughly overhauled it and were satisfied that it contained no tricks.

"Houdini lay down in it, while the challengers climbed to the platform and nailed down the heavy top again, using three-inch nails as before. The box was then tightly roped, three men pulling on the cords. Meanwhile, Houdini inside the box called out that it was very hot, and, putting a finger through an air hole, waggled it furiously.

"The box was then enclosed by a tent consisting of brass rods covered by a silken canopy.

"In ninety-five seconds Houdini was standing before his audience, breathless, and with his shirt in tatters. The box-makers, after careful examination, in which we joined, declared that both box and roping were intact.

“Now, was Houdini’s statement that he never knew how he got out of the box a mere blind, or did he employ supernormal forces and dematerialize? If I put a beetle in a bottle, hermetically sealed, and that beetle makes its escape, I, being only an ordinary human, and not a magician, can only conclude that either the beetle has broken the laws of matter, or that it possesses secrets that I should call supernormal.”

I would also ask the reader to consider the following account by the late Mr. Heat Mackenzie, one of the most experienced psychical researchers in the world. In his book, ‘Spirit Intercourse’ he says:

“A small iron tank filled with water was deposited on the stage, and in it Houdini was placed, the water completely covering his body. Over this was placed an iron lid with three hasps and staples, and these were securely locked. The body was then completely dematerialized within this tank in one and a half minutes, while the author stood immediately over it. Without disturbing any of the locks Houdini was transferred from the tank direct to the back of the stage front, dripping with water and attired in the blue jersey-suit in which he entered the tank. From the time that he entered it to the time that he came to the front only one and a half minutes had elapsed.

“While the author stood near the tank during the dematerialization process a great loss of physical energy was felt by him, such as is usually felt by sitters in materializing séances who have a good stock of vital energy, as in such phenomena a large amount of energy is required. This startling manifestation of one of Nature’s profoundest miracles was probably regarded by most of the audience as a very clever trick.”

In other words, in Mr. Mackenzie’s opinion the audience was successfully bluffed by the commercialization of psychic power. It is remarkable and most suggestive that in this case, as in the Bristol one already given, Houdini was anxious that some psychic from whom he could draw strength should stand near him.

Can any reasonable man read such an account as this and then dismiss the possibility which I suggest as fantastic? It seems to me that the fantasy lies in refusing its serious consideration.

A point which is worth considering is, that even if we grant

that enormous practice and natural advantages might conceivably give a man a facility in one direction which might appear preternatural, these feats of Houdini cover a larger range than could be accounted for by any one aptitude. This consideration becomes stronger still when one sees that his powers really covered the whole field of what we usually associate with physical mediumship in its strongest form, and can be covered so far as I can see by no other explanation whatever.

His friend Mr. Bernard Ernst, a well-known and very level-headed lawyer of New York, told me that on one occasion upon the veranda of his own country house at Long Island, Houdini proposed a séance. When hands were laid upon the table it began to rise up in the air. As Mrs. Houdini was present, Ernst took it for granted at first that the hands or feet were used to produce the effect. On examination, however, in good light he found that this was not so, and that there were no steel rods up the sleeve, which is a fraudulent method occasionally used. The feat appeared to him – and he is himself an experienced conjurer – to be clearly preternatural. Houdini himself rebuked a tendency towards levity upon the part of the company, and treated the matter with great gravity.

Now let us take the case of the séance which he gave to President Roosevelt – a bogus séance according to Houdini. It was on board the ‘Imperator’ in June 1920. It followed the lines of the usual slate phenomenon as practised by many mediums, honest and otherwise. The written question, folded and sealed, is placed between the folding slates, and the answer is found upon one side of the slate when they are opened. Roosevelt wrote the question, “Where was I last Christmas?” folded, sealed in an envelope, and placed it between the slates with his own hand. When the slates were opened a map of the South American journey of Roosevelt was found to be drawn, with the legend “Near the Andes.” The President was naturally greatly amazed and Houdini refused to give any explanation, though had it been a mere trick and there was no reason for secrecy, it would have been most natural that he should have explained it to so important a person, in order to show how easily fraudulent mediums can operate.

Long afterwards he did give an explanation, which is so

incredible that I would take it as an extreme example of that contempt which Houdini had for the public intelligence, taking it for granted that they would swallow without question anything which he might put before them. To condense a long story which the curious may find on pages 244–6 of Kellock’s very readable book, the “explanation” ran thus:

He knew that the President would be aboard and he received advance information about the South American travels from friends on the *Daily Telegraph*, which he made note of in case there should be a séance onboard. So far we are on understandable ground. He suggested that such a séance should be held, and had the slates prepared. This also we may pass. He then asked for written questions from the passengers, and himself wrote several, “Where did I spend last Christmas?” which he placed upon the top of the pile. We are still on more or less solid ground, presuming that the passengers were so dense as not to see the change of slates from the one which they examined to the prepared one. But now comes the fatal link in the chain. He claims that, “no telepathy or thought-transference being involved,” the President ‘by pure chance’ asked the very question for which these elaborate preparations had been made. People will believe this, and yet accuse Spiritualists of credulity. Can anyone who has the least conception of what is probable or possible accept such an explanation? It is only in psychic and preternatural (not supernatural) regions that such things really do become commonplace.

Again, a friend reports:

“One day a sceptic called upon him. Houdini read the man’s hand, prognosticated his future, and pronounced his past from a mere reading of his face, having only been told the day of his birth. This was done with an accuracy and vividness which astonished the subject.”

This sounds like possible clairvoyance, but is hardly in the repertoire of the conjurer.

There were many indications that Houdini possessed that psychic sensibility which is the groundwork of mediumship, though it really indicates, in my opinion, an unusual degree of soul power in the subject itself, without necessarily implying any

outside assistance. All thought reading seems to come under this category. On one occasion Pulitzer, the famous proprietor of the *New York World*, had been interested in the telepathic results obtained by Professor Gilbert Murray in England. Houdini dashed in, in his usual impetuous fashion, and claimed that he could duplicate them. A committee assembled in his own house, and put him to the test, they sitting on the ground floor, and he being locked up in a room at the top of the house, with the door guarded. Out of four tests he got three more or less correctly. When asked for an explanation he refused to answer, save to say that it was "scientific trickery." As usual he took it for granted that the Press and public would readily accept his explanation, and experience showed that he was right.

If once the mind is adjusted to the false assumption that psychic powers do not exist, then all reasoning power seems to become atrophied, as is the case in all-bigoted religions. As an example it was said, and is said, again and again, "How absurd for Doyle to attribute possible psychic powers to a man who himself denies them!" Is it not perfectly evident that if he did not deny them his occupation would have been gone forever? What would his brother-magicians have to say to a man who admitted that half his tricks were done by what they would regard as illicit powers? It would be "exit Houdini."

Now, having considered some of Houdini's inexplicable powers, let us turn to his direct relations with Spiritualism.

In public, as is notorious, he posed as the uncompromising foe of Spiritualism. It is useless to pretend that it was only the fake medium that he was after. We are all out after that scoundrel, and ready to accept any honest help in our search for him. Houdini wrote in the 'Christian Register' of July 1925:

"Tell the people that all I am trying to do is to save them from being tricked in their grief and sorrows, and to persuade them to leave Spiritualism alone and take up some genuine religion."

Thus his attack was a general one upon the whole cult.

But this was not in the least his attitude in private. I suppose that there are few leaders of the movement, and few known mediums, who have not letters of his taking the tone that he was a sympathetic inquirer who needed but a little more to be

convinced. His curious mentality caused him to ignore absolutely the experiences of anyone else, but he seemed to be enormously impressed if anything from an outside source came in his own direction. On one occasion he showed me a photograph which he had taken in California. "I believe it to be the only genuine spirit photograph ever taken!" he cried. To my mind, it was a very doubtful one, and one which no sane Spiritualist would have passed for a moment. But, in any case, if his was, as he claimed, genuine, why should he put down all others to fraud? He had another which he showed me with some disgust, but which seemed to me to be capable of a real psychic explanation, however unlikely. The sensitive film had been torn lengthways right down the plate, just as a sharp nail would have done. He assured me that he had put it into the carrier quite intact. It might, of course, have been some singular accident, or it might conceivably have been a sign of the same sort of disapproval, which was a possible explanation of the gravel throwing in the music hall of Boston.

His experience with decent mediums was exceedingly limited. He sat several times with Eva during the abortive investigation by the London Psychical Research Society. He wrote to me at the time, saying: "I found it highly interesting." There was no question of any exposure, and he admitted that he saw ectoplasm both come and go without being able to explain it. I believe that he once – and only once – sat with that great voice medium, Mrs. Wriedt, on which occasion nothing at all occurred, as will happen with all honest mediums, but does not happen with conjurers. There was certainly no talk of any exposure. He never sat with Miss Besinnet, nor with Mrs. Pruden, nor with Jonson of Pasadena, nor with Hope, nor with Mrs. Deane, nor with Evan Powell, nor Phoenix, nor Sloane. He claimed to have exposed P.L.O. Keeler, a medium whom I have heard quoted, but of whom I have no personal experience. Speaking generally, it may be said that his practical experience, save with a class of people whom a decent Spiritualist would neither use nor recommend, was very limited. His theoretical knowledge of the subject was also limited, for though he possessed an excellent library, it was, when I inspected it, neither catalogued nor arranged. I am told that his library was eventually put upon a more satisfactory basis, but I

speak of it as I saw it. His book, 'A Magician among the Spirits', is full of errors of fact, and never for a moment did he show any appreciation of the higher religious claims of the movement.

In spite of this very limited basis, he gave the public the impression that his knowledge was profound. To one reporter he said that he had attended ten thousand séances. I pointed out at the time that this would mean one a day for thirty years. His accusations against Spiritualists were equally wild. A man, named Frank Macdowell, committed a peculiarly atrocious murder at Clearwater in Florida. Houdini broadcast the fact that it was due to spirit teaching. Fortunately, a resolute Spiritualist, Mr. Elliot Hammond, went into the matter, and showed clearly that the murderer gave his complete disbelief in life after death to have been at the root of his actions. Spiritualism would have saved him.

I repeat that Houdini's attitude in private was quite different (to) what it was in public. At one time we had him really converted without the slightest intention of causing such a result. It was at Atlantic City, in 1922. He had spoken in a touching manner of his mother, so my wife, who has the great gift of inspired writing – that is, of writing which appears to be quite disconnected from her own mentality – tried if she could get any message for him. It was done at my suggestion, and I well remember that my wife needed much persuasion. We had no sooner assembled in our quiet sitting room than the power came, and the medium began to write with breathless and extraordinary speed, covering sheet after sheet, which I tore off and threw across to Houdini at the other side of the table. We gathered that it was a moving and impassioned message to her son from the dead mother. He asked a mental question of his mother without speech, and the medium's hand instantly wrote what he admitted to be an answer. Houdini was deeply moved, and there is no question that at the time he entirely accepted it.

When we met him two days later in New York, he said to us: "I have been walking on air ever since." I published the incident in *My American Adventure* so that he had to explain it away to fit it into his anti-Spiritualistic campaign. The line of criticism which he took was that it could not have been from his mother, since



a cross was put upon the top of the paper, and she was a Jewess. If he had cared to inquire we could have shown him that the medium *always* puts a cross on the top of her paper, as being a holy symbol. We consider that such exercises are, in the highest degree, religious. That is a complete answer to the objection.

His second criticism was that the letter was in English. This was plausible, but shows an ignorance of psychic methods. If a medium were in complete trance, it might well be possible to get an unknown tongue through her. Such cases are not very rare; but when the medium is not in trance, but writing by inspiration, it is the flood of thought and of emotion which strikes her, and has to be translated by her in her own vocabulary as best she can. As an illustration, I have notes of a case where two mediums in the same room both got an inspired message at the same moment. They each wrote down the same sense, but the wording was quite different. Thus the second criticism falls to the ground. In any case, one would imagine that he would have nothing but respect and gratitude for one who tried to help him, with no conceivable advantage to herself. No sign of this appears. It is the same queer mental twist which caused him first to take the name of the great Frenchman, and then to write a whole book, 'The Unmasking of Houdini,' to prove that he was a fraud.

But there was another very curious and suggestive incident in connection with that sitting at Atlantic City. As Houdini, much moved, rose from the table, he took up the pencil, and, bending to the papers, he said: "I wonder if I could do anything at this!" The pencil moved and he wrote one word. Then he looked up at me and I was amazed, for I saw in his eyes that look, impossible to imitate, which comes to the medium who is under influence. The eyes look at you, and yet you feel that they are not focused upon you. Then I took up the paper. He had written upon it the one word, "Powell." My friend, Ellis Powell, had just died in England, so the name had a meaning. "Why, Houdini," I cried, "Saul is among the prophets! You are a medium." Houdini had a poker face and gave nothing away as a rule, but he seemed to me to be disconcerted by my remark. He muttered something about knowing a man called "Powell" down in Texas, though he failed to invent any reason why that particular man should

come back at that particular moment. Then, gathering up the papers, he hurried from the room. It is probable that at that moment I had surprised the master secret of his life – a secret which even those who were nearest to him had never quite understood. Each fact alone maybe capable of explanation, but when a dozen facts all point in the same direction, then surely there is a case to answer.

I have said that the Houdini mentality was the most obscure that I have ever known. Consider this manifestation of it. My wife and I were, as I have shown, endeavouring to help him, with no possible motive save to give him such consolation as we could, since he was always saying that he wished to get in touch with his mother. Such consolation has often been given to others. Even if we suppose, for argument's sake, that we were mistaken in our views, we were, as he often admits, in dead earnest. Then, as we rose, he wrote down the name Powell, which meant much to me. If it was not written under psychic influence, why should he write anything at all, since no one asked him to do so? He saw the difficulty when he had to explain it away, so in his book he says that it was a "deliberate mystification" upon his part, and that he wrote it entirely of his own volition. Thus by his own showing, while we were honest with him, he was playing what I will charitably describe as a practical joke upon us. Is it any wonder that we look back at the incident with some bitterness? He does not attempt to explain how it was that out of all his friends the name that he wrote was the very one which might well have wished to come through to me. There is a limit to coincidence.

It is a curious fact that neither my wife nor I knew what was in the mother's letter until I read it in his book. It was written so swiftly that the medium, in her half-unconscious state, could at best only have a very vague idea of its purport, while I never even glanced at it. Now that I read it, it seems to me to be a very beautiful letter, full of love and of longing. As I have explained, the thoughts are given and are largely translated by the medium. Therefore, there are some sentences in which I can recognize my wife's style of expression, but the greater part of it is far more fervid – one might almost say more Oriental – than anything I have known my wife do. Here is a short extract:

“Oh, my darling, my darling, thank God at last I am through. I’ve tried, oh so often. Now I am happy. Of course, I want to talk to my boy, my own beloved boy. My only shadow has been that my beloved one has not known how often I have been with him all the while. I want him only to know that – that – I have bridged the gulf – that is what I wanted – oh, so much. Now I can rest in peace.”

It was a long and very moving message and bore every internal sign of being genuine. There is no question at all in my mind that Houdini was greatly shaken at the time and for some days afterwards. His objections were all afterthoughts in order to save the situation.

In the account of the matter which Houdini gave, he lays stress upon the fact that Mrs. Houdini had spoken to my wife the night before as to Houdini’s affairs, with many details as to his habits when with his mother. Now if the message had really come from my wife’s subconscious self I think it is certain that some of this information would have come through. I have known this to happen in the case of perfectly honest mediums and for this reason it is better never to tell a medium anything at all before a séance. A blank slate is the best to write upon. In the long message, however, which my wife gave there was no trace at all of the knowledge which she had normally gained, and which could have been used so effectively if anyone had been so wicked as to play a trick. This is, I think, a very clear sign that the message was not subconscious but did really come from the source it claimed. Houdini’s objection that the mother made no mention of the fact that it was her own birthday has no relevancy. What are birthdays on the other side? It is the death day which is the real birthday. In her rush of joy and emotion why should she pause to mention such a fact? The method in which Houdini tried to explain away, minimize and contort our attempt at consolation, which was given entirely at his own urgent request and against my wife’s desire, has left a deplorable shadow in my mind which made some alteration in my feelings towards him. Conscious as I was of his many excellent and wonderful qualities, such incidents took the edge off my sympathies, and put a strain upon our friendship.

When my friend, the late Miss Scatcherd, was in New York, some years ago, she saw a good deal of Houdini, and got, I fancy, as nearly into his complete confidence as anyone could do. To her, as to me, he showed no animosity to psychic things, but on the contrary, he was eager to show her the one and only true medium whom he had discovered in America. Miss Scatcherd was not, I gather, much impressed by his find, having known many better ones. She did not fail, however, to point out to him that in admitting the one medium he had really given away his whole case, and agreed that the Spiritualists had a solid foundation for their cult. She then accused him of being a powerful medium himself, for she was a strong sensitive, and all her psychic powers told her that he was the same. She also scolded him in her charming, good-natured way for having behaved shamefully in the "Margery" case, which he did not deny. The climax came, however, when, far out on the Atlantic, she received the following wireless message:

"From a sensitive to a sensitive. Wishing you a pleasant voyage. "Houdini."

A sensitive is a medium, and what is the logic of denouncing all mediums as frauds from the public platforms, and at the same time declaring in a telegram that you are one yourself?

Let us now follow a fresh line of thought. There can be no question at all, to anyone who has really weighed the facts, that Ira Davenport was a true medium. Apart from the evidence of thousands of witnesses, it is self-evident that he could at any time, by announcing himself and his brother as conjurers, and doing his unique performances as tricks, have won fame and fortune. This would seem a dreadful thing to do from the point of view of a good Spiritualist, and the Davenports went to the last possible limit by leaving the source of their powers to the audience to determine. Houdini has endeavoured to take advantage of this and to make out that Ira admitted in his old age that his feats were tricks. To clear away such an idea, I append the following letter, written by Ira in 1868 to *The Banner of Light*:

"It is singular that any individual, sceptic or Spiritualist, could believe such statements after fourteen years of the most bitter persecution, culminating in the riots of Liverpool, Huddersfield,

and Leeds, where our lives were placed in imminent peril by the fury of brutal mobs, our property destroyed, all because we would not renounce Spiritualism and declare ourselves jugglers when threatened by the mob and urged to do so. In conclusion, we denounce all such statements as base false hoods.”

We happen to be particularly well informed about the Davenports, for, apart from long statements from many well-known people who examined them, there are three books by people who knew them well, and who could not possibly have been deceived had they been swindlers. The smaller book, by Orrin Abbott, covers the early days, and the author tells how he was intimate with the brothers when they were little boys, and how at that time he had every opportunity of observing and testing their wonderful powers. These seem, as is often the case with mediums, to have been stronger in childhood than in later life, the power of levitation being one which Abbott witnessed, but which is not recorded of them elsewhere. The second and fullest is Dr. Nicol’s biography, while the third and most valuable is found in the *Supramundane Facts* of the Rev. J.B. Ferguson. Ferguson was a man of very high character, with a notable record behind him, and he travelled with the Davenports during their tour in England. He was with them at all hours of the day and night, and he has left it on record that their experiences when in private were quite as wonderful as anything that the public ever saw. It is notable that these well-attested feats included not only the instant freedom from ropes, however carefully fastened and sealed by the spectators, but also, on occasion, the freedom from handcuffs or twisted wire, and the power of opening locked doors. In a word, the Davenport powers were the Houdini powers, save that the latter had physical strength and agility which may have helped him to extend them.

My argument now begins to emerge. If it be true that the Davenports were real mediums (and let the inquirer really read their record before he denies it and if Houdini produced exactly similar results, which have in each case been inexplicable to their contemporaries, then is it conceivable that they were produced in entirely different ways? If Ira Davenport was a medium, then there is a strong *primâ facie* case that Houdini was a medium

too. Now we come upon some explanation of the cryptic saying of the rabbi by the graveside:” He possessed a wondrous power that he never understood, and which he never revealed to anyone in life.” What could that power be, save what we have called the power of the medium?

A singular incident is narrated by Mrs. Houdini and is incorporated in Mr. Kellock’s biography. Shortly after his marriage, Houdini took his girl wife and his brother to a lonely place, where he halted them upon a bridge at midnight. When the hour came he made them both raise their hands in the air and said to them, “Beatrice, Dash, raise your hands to heaven and swear that both of you will be true to me. Never betray me in any way, so help you God!” I would not put too much stress upon this incident. It may have been the considered act of one who already had some strange and secret knowledge which he foresaw might be used in the future and might be surprised by those around him.

I would not, in probing this difficult problem, pass too lightly over the considered words of the rabbi, that he had a wondrous power and did not himself understand it. This phrase fits very exactly into what has been stated to me by those who were nearest to him in life. “If it was so, he did not know it,” they have answered when I hinted at my conclusions. It seems hard to comprehend, and yet there may be something in this view. He was not a clear thinker, and he had no logical process in his mind. That surely is evident when in the same breath he denies all mediumship and claims to have discovered the greatest medium in America; or when he scoffs at spirit pictures but brings me a very indifferent one which he had taken himself. Imagine that such a man finds himself one minute inside a box; there is an interval of semi-trance during which his mind is filled with a vague feeling of confused effort, and then he finds himself outside the box. There is no obvious intervention of spirits, or of any outside force, but it just happens so. He has the same power in emerging from fetters, but he has no sort of philosophy by which he can explain such things. If we could imagine such a very strange and unlikely state of things as that, it would, at least, have the merit that it would give some sort of honest and rational explanation of a good deal which at present is dark. It is no unusual thing

for a medium to fail to understand his own results, but it would certainly seem almost incredible that anyone could have such results for many years and never correlate them with the experience of others. I, as his former friend, would welcome such an explanation if it could be sustained.

But how does the good rabbi know that he did not understand it? Only one man could say with authority, but he has passed away with closed lips, leaving, however, many signs behind for those who have the wit to follow them. There is one thing certain, and that is that the fate of the Davenports must have been a perpetual warning to Houdini. They had been ruined and hunted off the stage because it was thought that their claim was psychic. If his powers were to be drawn from that source, and if he were to avoid a similar fate, then his first and fundamental law must be that it be camouflaged in every possible way, and that no one at all should know his secret. If this be granted, a great many disconnected points become at once a connected whole. We see what he meant when he said that his own wife did not know how he produced his effects. We understand the voice of which he spoke. We comprehend dimly the unknown power of the rabbi. We can even imagine that a campaign against mediums, fortified by the knowledge that false mediums do exist, would be an excellent smoke-screen, though probably he had never thought out what view the unseen powers might take of such a transaction, any more than he calculated upon the interposition of Walter in the case of the conspiracy against the Crandons. I cannot say that all this is certain. I can only say that it covers the facts as I know them.

Of course, I know that he had a trick-box. I know also who constructed it, and the large amount that he paid for it. When I know also that he could do his escapes equally well in any local box, I am not inclined to attach much importance to the matter. He was a very astute man, and what he did he would do thoroughly, but he became too careless in his methods as he found he could do them with impunity.

Houdini is curiously contradictory in his account of the methods of Davenport. In his book 'A Magician among the Spirits,' he says:

“Their method of releasing themselves was simple. When one extended his feet the other drew his in, thus securing slack enough in the wrist rope to permit working their hands out of the loops. The second brother was released by reversing the action,”

But, as I have shown, in a letter to me he said:

“I know for a positive fact that it was not essential for them to release the bonds in order to obtain manifestations.”

So the previous explanation would seem to have been a fake in order to conceal the real one.

In another letter he says:

“I am afraid I cannot say that all of their work was accomplished by spirits.”

The “all” is suggestive. I would be the last to suggest that all of Davenport’s or indeed that all of Houdini’s work could be due to spirits. For that matter, we have to remember that we are ourselves spirits here and now, and that a man may very well be producing psychic effects without going beyond his own organism. It is in this sense that I suspect the Houdini results as being psychic, and I do not at all insist upon the interposition of outside forces. The two things are not far apart, however, and very easily slide into each other. There is, I hold, the medium’s use of his own power, there is a vague borderland, and there is a wide world beyond where his power is used by forces outside himself. I am convinced, for example, that raps may be produced voluntarily by a medium by a psychic effort, and I am equally convinced that at another stage these same raps may be used for purposes quite beyond his knowledge or control.

Is it possible for a man to be a very powerful medium all his life, to use that power continually, and yet never to realize that the gifts he is using are those which the world calls mediumship? If that were indeed possible, then we have a solution of the Houdini enigma. One who knew him well and worked with him often wrote to me as follows:

“Often he would get a difficult lock. I would stand by the cabinet and hear him say: ‘This is beyond me.’ After many minutes, when the audience became restless, I would say, ‘If there is anything in this belief in Spiritism why don’t you call on them to assist you?’ And before many minutes had passed Houdini had



mastered the lock. He never attributed this to psychic help. He just knew that that particular instrument was the one to open that lock, and so he did all his tricks.”

It is only fair to state, however, that this correspondent, who was in a good position to know, would not admit the mediumship. And yet if “that particular instrument” was, as stated, an appeal to spirits, it seems difficult to claim that the result was natural.

I would not limit my hypothesis to the idea that it was only when he met the Davenports that he first developed these strange powers. He seems only to have met Ira in 1909, and he had certainly done many marvellous feats himself before then. But the history and object lesson of the Davenports must have been well known to him, and have shown him what to avoid.

In putting forward such a view as I have here expressed it is natural that a critic should demand that I should show that similar results to those of Houdini have actually been produced by psychic power. Of this there can be no possible doubt upon the part of anyone who has studied the subject. I have already mentioned the case of the Davenports who were so badly treated by the English mob, and so maligned by Maskelyne and other English conjurers who produced a feeble imitation of their results and called it an exposure. They freed themselves with the greatest ease from metal bands as well as from the tightest ligatures. Such results can only be obtained by the passage of matter through matter – of the wrist for example through the metal – and though such a thing may seem inconceivable to the prosaic scientist of to-day, he would have pronounced wireless or flying to be equally impossible a generation or so in the past. We seem to need no spirit intervention here, but to be within the region of the latent powers of the human organism in peculiarly constituted individuals. There is, I believe, a constructive and a destructive power in thought alone which is akin to that “faith which moves mountains.” What sort of a vibration it can be which is shot out from the human brain and separates for a moment the molecules of that solid object towards which it is directed I do not know, but the results are clear and perhaps in the near future the cause may become equally so. From personal observation

I have assured myself that mediums in sealed bonds can cast those bonds, walk about the room, and be found later with the sealed bonds as before. If they could get out by a trick I see no way in which they could get back. I am forced, therefore, to predicate the existence of such a dematerializing and reconstructing force, which would amply cover most of the phenomena both of the Davenports and of Houdini. Such a force was demonstrated also in the experiments which were made with Slade by Zöllner and three other German professors, and described by him in his 'Transcendental Physics.' In this book many instances, closely observed, of the passage of matter through matter were recorded, accompanied by the interesting observation that the phenomenon was accompanied often by heat and a strong smell of burning. Bellachini, the Court conjurer, deposed that the results he saw were out of the region of conjuring altogether.

But suppose that Slade had gone round the world doing such things and allowing people to believe that they were tricks, while confusing the public by mixing them up with real tricks, would not his position have been very close to that of Houdini? We come, however, upon a more advanced class of phenomenon when we consider the case of the passage of a human body through a solid obstacle and its reassembly on the other side. If I can show that such cases have upon most unquestionable evidence occurred then I shall have got a possible line upon Houdini's performance. In the April number of *Psychic Science* there is the report by an American lady, Mrs. Hack, of the phenomena at a circle sitting in the Castle Millesimo, which is near Genoa. Mrs. Hack was herself present, as were the well-known Professor Bozzano, and other first-class witnesses. The Marquis Centurione Scotto, the owner of the castle, was one of the company. Suddenly in the midst of the proceedings he vanished from his chair. His friends were horrified. They searched the room and the castle, but he was gone. Finally, after hours of agitation he was found in a deep trance in an outhouse, which was separated by several locked doors from the main building. He was led back; and had no recollection how he had got there. Such in a few words is the gist of a case which was closely observed and fully reported. In it a human body is passed through several solid obstacles and reassembled on the other side.

How does this differ from the passage of Houdini's body through wooden planks, brick walls, paper bags, glass tanks, or whatever else was used to confine him?

In Mr. Campbell Holms' book, 'The Facts of Psychic Science', which is, and will be always, a most exact and valuable book of reference, there are a number of cases given where people have been transported through solid objects. Inexperienced and foolish people may jeer, but they will find it easier to do so than to refute the evidence. For example, upon June 3rd, 1871, Mrs. Guppy was floated from her own house in Highbury, and appeared upon the table of a room at 61 Lambs Conduit Street, where a séance was being held behind locked doors. A document was signed by the eleven sitters to testify to the fact and they had no possible object in perjuring themselves about the matter. Mrs. Guppy said that the last thing she could remember was sitting with her friend Miss Neyland. That lady deposed that Mrs. Guppy had suddenly vanished from her sight. Four of the sitters accompanied Mrs. Guppy home and heard what her friend had to say. It is difficult to find any flaw in such evidence and it would certainly have been conclusive in a court of law had it been a criminal case. But surely such a transposition is more remarkable than any of Houdini's, and had she done similar things in public her reputation would have been similar to his own.

In another case, that of Mr. Henderson, a photographer, quoted by Mr. Campbell Holms and described in the 'Spiritual Magazine' of 1874, no less than ten persons saw him vanish from a room, while nine others deposed to his arrival almost instantaneously at a point more than a mile distant. The idea that these nineteen witnesses can be disregarded is surely an impossible one, and yet here again we have evidence of the possibility by psychic means of passing a human body through solid obstacles by a process of dematerialisation and reassembly. I could quote a number of other cases, but the sum of it all is that Houdini's exploits, which are inexplicable in any other way, come into line at once if we compare them with other well-attested examples of psychic power. When one adds this evidence to the various other indications of similar powers which I have assembled here, the case seems to me to be greatly strengthened.

That Houdini's performances were on a different level from those of other magicians is shown by the fact that men who took a pride in fathoming such problems, and who were usually successful, were utterly foiled in their attempts to explain them in any reasonable way. Thus Mr. L. Adam, an English journalist who is an expert in such matters, writes to me that he could understand much that was done by Maskelyne and others, but

"I have never been able to discover anything about Houdini's tricks. Why? I have stood quite near him on the stage during the performances of many of his tricks, but it was like looking at a brick wall, so impenetrable were they. I remember on one occasion, while Houdini was waiting at the side of the stage ready for his 'turn,' he sat in a chair, threw his head back, closed his eyes, and appeared plunged in the profoundest meditations. A few moments before he had been talking confidentially to me. After the lapse of perhaps ten minutes, he 'came to' and continued his conversation with me as though nothing had intervened."

"Houdini once suggested to me that he should, by way of advertisement, profess to 'give away' his handcuff trick, which I was to publish. But it struck me that the volunteered so-called explanation, which included a hidden key, was too feeble to be convincing, and it was never developed. This was the nearest approach he ever came to discussing any of his secrets with me."

Here again in that trance-like condition before a performance we seem to get a glimpse of some psychic influence.

Houdini continually admitted that there were psychic things which he could not understand. I would say in parenthesis that one might be a strong medium oneself and yet have very small understanding of other people's phenomena. That was conspicuous in the case of D. D. Home. Here is a Houdini story told by Don Ryan

"Houdini had gone in a spiritualist church in Los Angeles, taking a camera-man, who carried a camera concealed. They made themselves inconspicuous till the witching hour at which the ghost was accustomed to walk. The hour came and with it the spirit. The leader of the group was holding conversation with the invisible spirit when the camera was trained on the spot without the knowledge of anybody save Houdini and his photographer.

“The developed plate which Houdini showed me revealed a well-defined transparent human figure draped in white.

“I can’t explain it and I don’t know what to think of it,’ said Houdini that day, and I could see that the thing had made a decided impression on him.

“It’s no more astonishing than your staying under water for an hour and a half in a lead-lined coffin,’ I told him.

“Ah,’ replied Houdini,’ but I know how that is done.”

The attempts upon the part of his brother-magicians to give some sort of explanation of Houdini’s feats only serve to deepen the mystery. Mr. Howard Thurston, for whose opinion I have respect, for he seemed to me to be the only American conjurer who had some real accurate knowledge of psychic matters, says that his feats all come within the power of advanced conjuring. I know that feats with the same name do so, but I venture to express the opinion that such feats as Houdini did have never been explained and are in an altogether different class. So too, Mr. Will Goldston, who is well known and respected as an authority on conjuring, has actually described in a book how they are done. Here again he seems to me to be describing the accepted method, which by no means covers Houdini’s results. To show the inadequacy of Mr. Goldston’s “explanations” he says in talking of the escape under water, “Without giving away his secrets I may say that he was always practically out of the box before it reached the water.” Considering that the screwed and corded box was in full sight of hundreds of spectators as it sank beneath the waves, it is difficult to accept such a solution as this. I admit that I am at a disadvantage when opposed to the technical knowledge of such men as Goldston and Thurston, but on the other hand I have my own technical and expert knowledge of psychic possibilities, and I put up a case for consideration and discussion.

He had, as already stated, a sitting with the medium Eva, and under the stringent and very deterrent conditions imposed by the London Psychical Research Society, which will be found described in their unsatisfactory and self-contradictory report, he did seem to have made acquaintance with ectoplasm in its very humblest form. He says in a letter to me written the next morning (June 22nd, 1920):

“They made Eva drink a cup of coffee and eat some cake (I presume to fill her up with some food-stuff), and after she had been sewn into the tights, and a net over her face, she manifested.

1. “Some froth-like substance, inside of net, ‘twas long, about five inches, she said it was elevated, but none of us four watchers saw it’ elevate.’
2. “A white plaster-looking affair over her right eye.
3. “Something that looked like a small face, say four inches in circumference. Was terra cotta coloured, and Dingwall, who held her hands, had the best look at the ‘object.’
4. “Some substance, froth-like, exuding from her nose, and Baggeley and Fielding say it protrudes from her nose, but Dingwall and I are positive that it was inside of net and was not extending from her nose, as I had the best view from two different places I deliberately took advantage to see just what it was.
5. “Medium asked permission to remove something in her mouth, show her hands empty, and took out what appeared to be a rubbery substance, which she disengaged, showed us plainly, we held the electric torch, all saw it plainly, when presto! It vanished. It was a surprise effect indeed! The séance started at 7.30 and lasted past midnight.

“We went over the notes, and no doubt you will get a full report. I found it highly interesting.”

It will be found from these extracts that when faced with facts his attitude was very different from what his public utterances would lead one to expect.

Be his mystery what it may, Houdini was one of the most remarkable men of whom we have any record, and he will live in history with such personalities as Cagliostro, the Chevalier D’ Eon, and other strange characters. He had many outstanding qualities, and the world is the poorer for his loss. As matters stand, no one can say positively and finally that his powers were abnormal, but the reader will, I hope, agree with me that there is a case to be answered.