

HARRY HOUDINI

(From *The Trestleboard* of Watuppa Lodge, Massachusetts, December 1997)

Harry Houdini, an American magician, was the son of Jewish parents. His father was a very learned Rabbi. Houdini was born on April 6, 1874 in Appleton, Wisconsin. His real name was Erich Weiss, but he took the name of Houdini after the French magician, Houdin. When he was nine in 1882, he started out to earn his living as a contortionist and trapeze performer in a 5-tent circus, located in his hometown. His mother disliked his occupation, or at least thought he might improve upon it, and much to his regret took him to a locksmith.

It was an inspiration on the good lady's part, for it is owing to his knowledge of locks and keys that Houdini climbed into fame and later became world famous.

However, at that period of his career, the trade of locksmithing had no charm for him. To use his own expression, "One day I made a bolt for the door and never again entered my master's workshop." The youthful Houdini ran away from home and traveled with a show as a sleight-of-hand artist, a clown and a Punch and Judy performer, and became world famous for his feats of magic. Eventually, he sought to rival the Davenport Brothers in their rope-tying feats and was very successful.

Subsequently, he showed astounding ability in extricating himself from handcuffs, ropes, locked trunks, jail breaking, and bonds of any sort. At one time, he had himself roped and locked in a packing case, which was bound with steel tape and dropped into the harbor off the battery in New York City. He appeared on the surface of the water in 59 seconds.

After brilliant tours in vaudeville in this country, he went to Europe and created a furor in England, France, Germany, and Russia with his sensational escapes from prison cells.

Houdini attributed all of his feats of magic to natural, physical effects and explained how many of his tricks were performed. He exposed the tricks of fraudulent spiritualistic mediums, often producing "spiritualistic" phenomena himself which he explained in non-mystical, physical terms. Before he died, Houdini arranged a definite test of spiritualism. He devised a ten-word code, which he would communicate to his wife, if possible, within ten years after his death. After he died, various mediums maintained that they were able to establish contact with him, but none was able to transmit to his wife the prearranged code.

Houdini's collection of playbills and programs of eminent magicians, living and dead, constituted a veritable history of natural magic and prestidigitation, to say nothing of the largest library of books in the world. His house in New York is a storehouse of information for magicians. Houdini is the author of a number of books on magic and

kindred topics, the most ambitious of which is *A Magician Among the Spirits*, New York, 1924.

Brother Houdini was raised to the degree of Master Mason in St. Cecile Lodge, New York. He was a noble of Mecca Temple, Mystic Shrine, of New York.