



Harry Houdini climbs out of galvanized coffin in which he stayed an hour and a half while it was submerged in a swimming pool.

HOW HOUDINI DIED

It was in Montreal that the famed magician and escape artist received the blows that killed him

MORE than 25 years ago, after writhing in agony for several days in a Detroit hospital, Harry Houdini, billed as "The World's Greatest Magician," died of a burst peritoneum. Today his name still evokes a murmur of admiration akin to awe wherever magicians, prestidigitators, sleight-of-hand experts, handcuff kings and escape artists for-gather. For Houdini was the acknowledged sovereign of them all.

Manacled, handcuffed and tied with ropes, Houdini could slip out of his bonds in a few seconds, while in full view of a packed theatre audience. But his best-known trick was his escape after he had been manacled and placed in an iron box which was then lowered into the East River in New York.

Little gambits like leaping from one plane to another with handcuffed hands, while flying at 3,000 feet, was par for his course. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who knew him well, reported that he could, and continually did, walk straight out of any prison cell in which he might be confined.

"Handcuffs might have been jelly — so easily did his limbs pass through them," said Doyle.

When Houdini was in Holland, Doyle narrates, he got the local basket makers to weave a basket around him. Out of this he emerged with no difficulty. He was shut up later in a sealed paper bag and came out, leaving it intact. A block of ice was frozen around his body and he burst his way out. He was put into the notorious Siberian convict van in Moscow but walked straight out of it.

It was reported also that on December 2, 1906, Houdini leaped from the old Belle Isle Bridge at Detroit, heavily handcuffed and released himself under icy water which would have paralyzed any other man. Then, a year later, he was thrown into San Francisco Bay with his hands tied behind his back and a 75-

By Stanley Handman

WEEKEND Staff Writer

pound ball and chain attached to his body. He escaped, none the worse for his experience.

Now, as it must to all great men, a movie "life" has come to Harry Houdini. Paramount has filmed a version of his life in which actor Tony Curtis (who bears a remarkable likeness to Houdini as a young man) takes the lead part. Though the story of Houdini is fascinat-

ing to everyone, it has a special note of interest to Canadians. For it was in Montreal that the world-famous magician received a series of sharp blows which led to his death soon after.

It was in October, 1926, and Houdini was appearing at the Princess Theatre in a number of exciting escape tricks. But Prof. William Tait, then head of the psychology department of McGill University, was more interested in Houdini's work in spiritualism and as a result invited the magician to lecture to the students at the university. (Continued on Page 33)



At left, Houdini struggles out of a straitjacket while hanging in mid-air. Right, Tony Curtis plays the part in a new movie.



Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, and Houdini both investigated spiritualism.



Mrs. Houdini prepares to escape from locked glass box used by her husband.

How Houdini Died

(Continued from Page 11)

In *A Magician Among The Spirits*, written by Houdini and published in 1924, only two years before his death, the magician said: "... mine has not been an investigation of a few days or weeks or months but one that has extended over 30 years and in those 30 years I have not found one incident that savored of the genuine." Advance notice of the magician's topic was given heavy display in the *McGill Daily*, with the result that when Houdini appeared at the McGill Union at 4 P.M. on October 19, 1926, the place was packed.

In the audience was Samuel J. Smiley, then a young arts student and now a Montreal lawyer. An amateur artist, Smiley made a sketch of the magician which two fellow-students later took to Houdini and asked him to autograph. This he did, writing across the back "Houdini, born April 6, 1874, Appleton, Wisc. Best Wishes." But more than that—he invited the young artist to come to the Princess Theatre at 11 A.M. the following Friday to make a drawing for Houdini himself.

THE elated student turned up at 10:30 in the morning, bringing along a fellow-student named Jack Price. At about 11 o'clock, Houdini arrived with his wife, his secretary and a woman introduced later as his nurse. A keen showman, Houdini stopped in the crowded lobby and his nurse turned to him and said in a loud voice: "Don't you think we should have lunch?"

"Sure," replied Houdini. And with that he leaned over to a woman in the crowd and pulled a hot dog and bun out of her hat. Then, with a grin, he went inside. There, the other members of the party dispersed, while only Houdini, Smiley and Price entered the magician's dressing room, where the two students were told to sit down, while Houdini made himself comfortable.

As Smiley recalls it: "... Houdini reclined with his collar open at the neck and his shirt sleeves rolled, on a small couch along the wall opposite the door. My friend (Price) sat in the centre of the couch. I was seated at the foot of the couch and since Houdini was bolstered up by several cushions, I was able to obtain a full view of his face. A third chair, near the door and almost in line with Houdini's head, was empty."

Houdini appeared to be in good spirits and chatted amiably with his two young visitors, meanwhile apologizing for lying down. He said he had had a slight accident several weeks previously which had left him with a slight limp which he found fatiguing. As a result, he needed all the rest he could get because his work on the stage was extremely arduous and a strain on his physique.

"If you will excuse me," he said, "I'd like to read part of my mail."

Then, to the amazement of the two students, Houdini proceeded to open his letters by literally unpasting the envelopes, without tearing them, displaying not only a high de-

gree of dexterity but also a remarkable lightness of touch and extreme strength. He later explained that the success of his stage work lay in these three qualities—dexterity, strength and lightness of touch — plus a carefully developed ability to husband his breathing when confined in a limited amount of space.

In recalling the dressing-room interview, Smiley says: "My first impression that I had obtained at the McGill Union lecture was confirmed. His sallow complexion, his tightly-drawn skin, the dark shadows encircling his tired-looking, deep-set eyes, the muscles about the temples and at the sides of his mouth twitched nervously. His mouth and eyes were tense."

While Smiley sketched, Houdini talked casually about himself, describing how he had changed his name from plain Harry Weiss to Houdini in admiration of the great French magician Houdin. He said that as a young man he had first joined a circus and then, as his interest and knowledge of things "magical" grew, he moved on to the stage, where he gradually concentrated more on his escape tricks than on his other work. As the magician talked, there suddenly came a rap on the dressing-room door and in walked Houdini's secretary and a tall individual wearing a blue gabardine coat. He was about six feet two and carried several books under one arm. He appeared to know Houdini and had apparently come to return a book that the magician had lent him several days before. After exchanging a few words with the newcomer, Houdini introduced him as J. Gordon Whitehead, a McGill student.

RECALLS Smiley: "I didn't know him as a student but I assumed that he was because Houdini said so. At any rate he was an oldish-looking young man, about 27 or 28 I would say. His face was ruddy, his hair thin at the top and he appeared to be powerfully though loosely built."

Whitehead took a seat and sat quietly listening to the magician talk while Smiley sketched. After a while Whitehead interjected several questions and then abruptly asked: "What is your opinion of the miracles described in the Bible?"

Houdini smiled.

"I would prefer not to discuss that," he said politely.

When Whitehead insisted, Houdini said: "Maybe I might make this observation: What would future generations have said about my feats had I performed them in biblical times? Would they have referred to them as miracles?"

At this point Whitehead switched the conversation to Houdini's physical strength.

"Is it true," he asked, "that you can take a couple of hard blows to the stomach without getting hurt?"

Houdini shrugged his shoulders, then raised his arms.

"Feel my forearm and back muscles," he said. "They're like iron."

"But is it true about your stomach?" persisted Whitehead.

"My forearm and back muscles are very strong," the magician repeated.

Again Whitehead asked him about his stomach, finally saying: "Would you mind if I hit you in the stomach several times?"

Though he was reluctant at first, this direct query brought a ready assent from the magician. As Houdini lay there, Whitehead swiftly swung his arm back and delivered several hard blows to the magician's abdomen. The other two students saw the magician wince and Jack Price, alarmed, jumped to his feet and cried out to Whitehead: "Are you crazy?" But Houdini waved him back, raised his arm and said quietly to Whitehead: "That will do."

The magician then resumed his position on the couch and started talking about other things while Smiley went on to finish his drawing. He handed it to Houdini who said it was a fine job and asked the young artist to sign it. This Smiley did. It was now after noon and as the students prepared to leave Houdini said to Smiley: "You made me look a little tired in this picture. The truth is that I do not feel so well." He thanked the young artist and the students left.

Next day Houdini left for Detroit. En route, on the train, he suffered a severe abdominal attack and when he reached Detroit, he was rushed to the hospital. There, surgeons who operated on him found he was suffering from a burst peritoneum and said that the rupture was due to—"several heavy blows." On October 31, 1926, on Halloween, Houdini was dead. 