

HOUDINI

an original screenplay

by

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Rastar

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. black shape is lurching toward us. Huge. Grotesque fins, bulbous tentacles. A confusion of bubbles. An unearthly rushing sound.

Then muted, distant laughter. Figures around a bonfire on the beach: a skeleton, a ghost, a harlequin. Dancing, drunk.

Title: "Hallowe'en 1924"

Behind the revelers, a South Hampton mansion shuttered for the season. Lining the porch rails and in every blind window, a jack o' lantern glows orange. Above, an inky autumn night sky. Storm clouds shred past the moon.

Underwater. The monster is closer, its fleshy maw gaping open. An empty eye, staring.

The party. A townies' masked ball on a summer estate. Strange, hysterical flapper music from a hand-cranked Victrola. Gardeners, footmen, maids, a couple of hookers.

A young couple strolls up the beach holding hands. They pass the bonfire. The skeleton calls to them, drunkenly waves a bottle. They ignore him, move toward the water.

The monster is closer now, its dorsal fin slicing through the breakers. Its tentacles splay in a clutching arc, as the storm-driven waves propel it toward the beach.

The couple stands at the water's edge, kissing. Oblivious.

Then a huge wave thunders toward them, hefting the creature, hurling it forward. It thuds on the wet sand; its ropes of seaweed uncurl as the water sloshes over it. Hulking. Still. Glowing eerily in the moonlight.

The woman sees it, horrified. She tries to pull away, but the man holds her. He is fascinated, overwhelmed by the sheer size of the animal.

YOUNG WOMAN

What is it?

YOUNG MAN

I dunno... but it's dead.

He moves toward it, pulling her by the hand. As they near it, the creature suddenly lolls onto its back. The massive jaws open. Deep within, a hideous sound. The echoing death rattle.

The woman is screaming, as WE CUT TO:

A violent struggle. The glint of shackles, manacles, chains. The sinews of powerful forearms encased by translucent viscera, entrails. A sticky pinkish glow. A powerful blow, cuffs fall open, the wrists break free.

INT. SHUBERT THEATER -- NEW YORK -- NIGHT

The beached creature -- a narwhal -- is centerstage. The carcass has been embalmed; it lies stiffly under the limelights. Its seaweed ropes are now draped theatrically around it. Men stand on either side with axes, ready to hack it open.

Incongruously, the beast's belly is trembling, pulsing as if it's about to give birth.

The place is packed, people jammed into the aisles. The theater is vibrating with anxiety. Faces fraught with expectation and horror. Hands grip the backs of seats.

They are being whipped into a frenzy by a petite woman dressed like an ancient priestess, blaring through a megaphone. She is BESS HOUDINI.

We can hear only snatches of her monologue over the hysteria: "Can anyone escape the jaws of death... the sea monster's tomb??!!..." A roar from the crowd: the creature's belly is convulsing, the labor inside is manic now; a sudden heave, a sucking, ripping sound.

Then a hand gripping a chain appears through the skin of the beast. A woman is screaming. The skin bursts open -- an explosion of light:

HOUDINI emerges from the monster, exultant, draped in chains. Liberated, commanding, radiating primal power. Like a figure from mythology. Like a god. The crowd is frenzied, wild.

BESS

Ladies and gentlemen -- *the Great Houdini!*

HOUDINI strips the chains from his dripping chest and legs, throws them to the floor. He strides to the footlights, arms raised in triumph. The audience surges up onto the stage, grabs him in their arms. Carries him, cheering, up the main aisle.

A flashbulb explodes, taking us to:

INT. SHUBERT THEATER -- DRESSING ROOM -- NIGHT

An impromptu press conference. HOUDINI holds court in his dressing room, showering from his escape. He talks over the noise of the water.

HOUDINI (O.S.)

...Your lead is the Biblical angle, boys:
the belly of the beast. You know, the epic
stuff...

HOUDINI reaches for a bathrobe, steps out of the shower. His tremendous presence is equally apparent offstage. He exudes intensity, energy, charisma, and supreme confidence. Surrounded by REPORTERS and PHOTOGRAPHERS, HOUDINI is truly in his element.

REPORTER 1

Where'd you come up with the idea, Harry?

BESS comes in dressed for dinner -- tight-fitting black dress, white gloves, cloche hat. She carries HOUDINI's freshly-pressed jacket and shirt.

HOUDINI

That leviathan wasn't washed up on Long
Island half an hour before The Herald
challenged me if I could escape from it--

REPORTER 2

Harry--

BESS

--In cuffs and chains -- seventy-four
pounds -- make sure you put that in--

REPORTER 2

--I'm with The Herald, Harry. My editor
says the whole "belly of the beast" was
your idea. That you had the whale picked
up off the beach, embalmed down
Houlihan's, and then got the paper to
challenge you.

A beat.

HOUDINI
(flashes the smile)
I gotta give you guys something to write
about.

Laughter.

BESS
We hafta go, Harry. Dinner...

HOUDINI stands, strips off the robe.

HOUDINI
Say, before I get dressed, any of you
fellas wanna take the challenge?
(pats his stomach)
One punch in the feedbag...

The reaction: they've all tried at least once.

HOUDINI
Oh, so nobody needs five grand?

REPORTER 2
How 'bout you, Mrs. Houdini.

BESS
I don't have to hit him...
(a sleight of hand)
I lifted his wallet.

Laughter as she holds it up. The REPORTERS turn toward IRV, a
pudgy photographer: "C'mon, Irv". He steps forward, tentative,
considers it a moment. Then:

IRV
Nah... I could never hurt you.

HOUDINI
C'mon Irv, this is your chance. I was a no
account Jew from Harlem once, too. 'Course
I had guts...
(pats Irv's belly)
All you've got is the gut.

The others: "Oooooohhh". IRV darkens, moves forward. He squares
himself, rears back.

HOUDINI

(throws up his hands)

Hold on there, slugger. You gotta let me prepare.

HOUDINI wipes his mouth, braces, tightens the washboard abs. Then he nods. IRV grunts as he hits HOUDINI as hard as he can. HOUDINI absorbs the blow, doubles over. He moans as he slowly straightens.

Gasps. Blood is pouring from HOUDINI's mouth.

IRV

(goes white)

Jesus, Harry, I didn't--

HOUDINI stares at him. Then he spits a bloody squib out of his mouth.

HOUDINI

(the smile)

Trick or treat.

Laughter as HOUDINI wipes the stage blood from his mouth, pats IRV on the back.

HOUDINI

No hard feelings, pal.

As the REPORTERS prepare to leave, HOUDINI puts on his shirt.

HOUDINI

Anybody wants tickets for the wife and kids, you let Bess know. And I expect all you fellas up in Buffalo to cover the new movie.

As HOUDINI holds up two bow ties to BESS, one of the reporters -- LARRY HOAGLAND (50s), portly, pock-marked -- lingers behind.

HOUDINI

Spots or stripes?

BESS

Stripes -- this ain't Des Moines.

HOUDINI

Do it up for me, would you, honey?

HOAGLAND

Didja hear about the Scientific American prize, Harry?

HOUDINI

What about it?

As BESS knots HOUDINI's tie:

HOAGLAND

Psychic Committee's gonna give it to some Boston housewife. They done seances with her and decided she's the real McCoy.

HOUDINI

(dry)

No kidding... What's her name?

HOAGLAND

Nobody knows. They're calling her "Margery -- The Witch of Lime Street".

BESS

Oh please--

HOAGLAND

Your old pal Conan Doyle told me this Margery's the only person proved by science to be able to contact the dead.

HOUDINI

Conan Doyle never met a medium he didn't like. He may have created Sherlock Holmes, but when it comes to a seance, he's just another sucker.

HOAGLAND

(starts to write)

Alliteration -- I like that.

HOUDINI

Quote that, Hoagland, and you'll never get another scoop outta me. He may be a sucker, but he's still a friend.

BESS helps him into his jacket.

HOUDINI

Besides, Scientific American isn't giving nothin' to nobody without my say-so. That I guarantee.

HOAGLAND

Oh no, Harry, it's already decided. They're giving Margery the prize. Twenty thousand bucks.

(then)

Half of which you put up, I think.

As HOUDINI glances at BESS, WE CUT TO:

HOUDINI

(livid)

You drew up the check. Behind my back!

HOUDINI slams the door: "Psychical Research".

F. SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN OFFICES -- CONFERENCE ROOM -- DAY

HOUDINI moves to the end of the conference table, BESS behind him. Seated at the table, surrounded by walls of books on the occult, are DR. J. MALCOLM BIRD (35), tall, gaunt, head of the committee; PROFESSOR DANIEL FROST (late 20s), beard, glasses, bookish; and SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE (60s), huge, tweed, walrus mustache.

CONAN DOYLE

Calm down, Harry...

BIRD

We haven't actually given her the check yet--

HOUDINI

What were you waiting for, Dr. Bird -- the tooth fairy to endorse it?

FROST

This is a scientific committee, Mr. Houdini. Please spare us the vaudeville humor.

HOUDINI

One thing I learned in my years in vaudeville was not to make an ass of myself in public.

CONAN DOYLE

We sat with her twelve times, Harry. Each time the control was complete. Feet and hands. Margery couldn't possibly have moved without our knowing--

BIRD

Yet there was an energy in that room that you could feel.

BIRD holds up a broken monocle.

BIRD

It was so powerful, it shattered my monocle -- blew it off my face!

HOUDINI examines the monocle, puts it back in BIRD's pocket.

HOUDINI

(glances at Bess)

What were the material manifestations?

CONAN DOYLE

Levitation, psychokinesis, an independent spirit voice--

BIRD

Her dead brother "Walter", an extraordinary character--

FROST

And ectoplasm--

BESS

Wouldn't be a show without ectoplasm.

FROST

But Margery produces the ectoplasm from her body. From her... naked flesh.

BESS

And being a psychologist, Professor Frost, you concentrate on the ectoplasm and not the naked flesh.

HOUDINI laughs.

FROST

This is not a laughing matter.

HOUDINI

I agree. Spiritualism is serious business -- a big business. These mediums are getting rich off the grief of innocent people--

BIRD

We're all familiar with your crusade against Spiritualism--

HOUDINI

What happens after death is the most important question in life, Dr. Bird. It's the basis for all religions, the obsession of every philosopher who's ever lived. Before I accept an answer to it, I want *absolute proof*.

CONAN DOYLE

Harry, some things can't be proved, they can only be experienced.

HOUDINI

What would Sherlock Holmes say to that?!

CONAN DOYLE

Holmes is a fictional character; I'm talking about real people. Millions of us, who lost loved ones in the war. My own son, Kingsley... twenty-five years old. His life gone in an instant. I needed more than comfort, I needed contact.

(then)

I went to Margery expecting the usual sideshow tricks. But in that room, in that darkness, I found peace...

CONAN DOYLE struggles for the words.

CONAN DOYLE

Kingsley's voice, his face, unmistakable.
I had him back. Not just a memory -- a
presence. Margery did that for me... I
believe she can do it for you.

A moment.

HOUDINI

What's her real name?

They look at each other.

CONAN DOYLE

Mina Crandon.

BIRD

This is in the strictest confidence.

HOUDINI

Why do you call her "Margery"?

BIRD

Because her husband is Dr. Crandon.

HOUDINI looks at him.

FROST

Dr. Le Roi Crandon -- the author of "Post-operative Gynecological Treatment".

BESS

Ohhhh, that Dr. Crandon.

CONAN DOYLE

Bess, he's one of Boston's most prominent
citizens, a retired surgeon, a decorated
war veteran. He and Margery are adamant
that there be no publicity.

BESS

They'll settle for the money.

FROST

(glares)

Dr. Crandon is independently wealthy. He
certainly wouldn't risk his reputation for
a few thousand dollars.

HOUDINI

His wife stands to become the most famous woman in the world, Frost. There is no price you can put on that.

FROST

I know Margery, Mr. Houdini. I've had the honor of private sittings with her. She's warm, gracious, intelligent. She's beyond reproach -- she's a saint!

BESS

Is that your scientific conclusion?

FROST

You show business people have no respect for anything--

BIRD

The conclusion of the committee is that Margery's gift is real.

HOUDINI

What you saw... are you sure it was reality and not magic?

BIRD

I think I know reality when I see it.

HOUDINI

The shattered monocle; that was real?

BIRD

Absolutely.

HOUDINI

Look at it now.

BIRD takes the monocle from his pocket -- the glass is now intact. Reactions from the others.

HOUDINI

Beware of magic... it bites.

BIRD stares at the monocle, then:

BIRD

All right, Houdini. If you can prove that the seances are false, I'll withdraw the award.

HOUDINI picks up his hat and coat.

HOUDINI

Then publish my challenge to Margery on the cover of your next issue. If she's genuine, she'll have much more than twenty thousand dollars. She'll have the public endorsement of Houdini.

HOUDINI joins BESS at the door.

HOUDINI

But if she's a fraud... I'll destroy her.

INT. SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN OFFICES -- CORRIDOR -- DAY

HOUDINI and BESS move down the hallway toward the elevator.

HOUDINI

(fuming)

Idiots...

BESS

You know what fascinates me, Ehrie? After all the phony seances, you still get worked up about this.

HOUDINI

I got ten thousand on the line.

BESS

Sure, sure. Now you wanna tell me the real reason?

HOUDINI

I've exposed hundreds of these so-called mediums. I never finished high school and I can see right through them. How come these Ph.D.'s can't?

BESS

Because it's not about what you know, it's about what you don't know. And what people don't know scares them, even if they got a Ph.D.

HOUDINI

Well, they can look down their noses at Ehrlic Weiss, but they can't ignore Houdini.

They have reached the birdcage elevator. Ring.

BESS

One sitting with you, Margery'll be lucky she's not in Sing-Sing.

HOUDINI

You're damn right. And if she scams me, I'll make her wish she was dead.

The elevator doors open, they step in.

BESS

Whaddayou mean "if"?

HOUDINI looks at her.

BESS

You said "if" she scams you...

The operator closes the ornate, wrought iron door.

HOUDINI

When they turn the lights out, there's always an "if".

We hold on HOUDINI as the barred light of the passing grilles strobes on his face.

WE CUT TO:

Icicles on barred windows. Faces of prisoners staring down. Skeletal, sunken eyes, stretched skin, broken teeth. Dirty snow.

Title: "Moscow, 1910"

EXT. LYUBYANKA PRISON -- COURTYARD -- DAY (MEMORY)

HOUDINI is at the center surrounded by Russian militiamen. BESS is nearby with a corps of international press. Before them, the black hulk of a prison van.

HOUDINI

(intones)

The carette. A steel case, reinforced by lead. One tiny window, one door, one lock. Russia has put millions of people into these vans.

(turns to the Warden)

Has it not, Major Slavitzky?

MAJOR

Correct.

As HOUDINI speaks, his words are translated into half a dozen languages.

HOUDINI

And no one has ever escaped.

MAJOR

No one.

HOUDINI

Where is the key to this lock?

MAJOR

In Siberia. Three weeks, three thousand miles away. If you do not escape, I cannot open. And you will die.

Reactions from the reporters. BESS screams theatrically, breaks through. She throws herself on HOUDINI, hysterical.

BESS

For God's sake, Harry, don't do it!

HOUDINI holds her, calms her.

HOUDINI

It's all right, sweetheart.

HOUDINI gestures dramatically to the prisoners, speaks loudly enough for the reporters to hear:

HOUDINI

These poor prisoners need hope... they need a hero. It might as well be the son of a rabbi.

HOUDINI takes out an antique silver pocket watch, gives it to her.

HOUDINI

But if I don't escape, keep this. It's all I have left of my father.

BESS

Oh God, Harry...

Then she kisses him.

CLOSE: as BESS slips a lock pick into his mouth with her tongue.

The prisoners look on as HOUDINI is roughly stripped to his briefs by the militiamen. The MAJOR quickly fastens an iron bilbo on wrists.

MAJOR

You have thirty minutes.

WIDE: HOUDINI raises his cuffed arms for the prisoners. He climbs onto the running board, steps inside the carette. The MAJOR slams the door, closes the massive padlock.

Gears grind: the carette is backed into a corner of the prison yard.

CLOSE: BESS opens the silver pocket watch.

INT. CARETTE -- DAY -- MOMENTS LATER

Frost on the lead-lined walls. HOUDINI is shivering as he takes the pick from his mouth, his breath visible in the brutal cold. He slides it between his teeth, effortlessly opens the bilbo.

Then he grasps the pick between his toes, pulls himself up to the barred window. He swings his leg up, slips his foot between the bars.

A TIME CUT: HOUDINI is torturously working his leg down the door ward the lock, the pick between his toes. He fits the pick into the lock.

EXT. COURTYARD -- DAY -- MOMENTS LATER

BESS glances at the MAJOR, then up at the prisoners. They are silent, solemn, as if in church. She looks down at the pocket watch.

CLOSE: as the seconds tick by.

BACK TO SCENE: HOUDINI is working the pick back and forth in the lock. His face is wedged against the bars. Absolute concentration. Muscles straining as he holds his position, suspended. Then:

CLOSE: the pick falls into the snow on the running board.

HOUDINI is stunned. He presses his face to the bars, sees the pick. He hoists himself up, strains desperately to reach it with his toes. He can't. He lowers himself to the floor, begins searching for a seam in the lining, clawing at the lead plates. He stands, panicking. Then he pulls at the bars. Frantic, freezing.

CLOSE: on the pocket watch, the second hand nearing 12.

BACK TO SCENE: HOUDINI turns, his back to the wall, panting. He slides down into a crouch, hugging himself for warmth.

CLOSE: on HOUDINI. Motionless. Then: we hear an atavistic hum. Like Tibetan pipes. Or the sustained open C string of a cello.

Then: he stares into the shadows of the van: a presence, indistinct but undeniable. The darkness itself is taking form.

HOUDINI gazes at it. Fascinated. Frightened. He raises his arm, presses himself back against the door as if to escape. There is something in the carette with him.

OUTSIDE: The MAJOR snaps his watch closed, barks an order in Russian.

BESS

(moves to him: urgently)

You have to give him more time.

MAJOR

This is not a theater; this is reality.
Nothing is more real than this.

The MAJOR motions to the driver. He climbs in, starts the engine, releases the brake. The carette rumbles forward, revealing:

HOUDINI. Crouched against the stone wall, shivering. He straightens, looks up. The prisoners burst into triumphant cheers.

The reporters crowd around the carette as the MAJOR checks the padlock: intact. The prisoners are chanting: "Hou-di-ni, Hou-di-ni, Hou-di-ni".

BESS throws a coat around HOUDINI. He is troubled, shaken.

HOUDINI
I dropped the pick...

CLOSE: BESS palms the pick from him.

BESS
It's all right, honey.

HOUDINI
You don't understand... I couldn't reach it. I couldn't get out...

BESS
But you did...

HOUDINI
There was something in there, Bess... something...

As BESS turns, looks at him, WE CUT BACK TO:

HOUDINI behind the barred grille of the birdcage elevator. He hesitates a moment, then pulls it open. His face betrays a deep disquiet as he steps out.

EXT./INT. LIME STREET HOUSE -- DUSK -- RAIN

The Crandon home. A towering Georgian manse in a blind alley on Beacon Hill. Rain runs from the eccentricities of the four story facade. Elaborate cornices. Deep shadowed gables. Stark chimneys.

We are gliding through an opulent parlor thick with shadow, up carved bannister, over a gothic balustrade. An ornate four-story staircase topped by a glowering skylight.

As we do, we hear a solo cello -- an obsessive, repetitive arpeggio.

We are following DR. LE ROI CRANDON (50s) toward the terminal door of an amber-lit hallway. He is distinguished, patrician, a self-effacing charm. He carries a glass of Burgundy wine. He knocks quietly at the door, opens it.

INT. LIME STREET HOUSE -- MARGERY'S BEDROOM -- DUSK

MARGERY, naked, her back to us, sits before the fireplace, her body silhouetted by the light of the electric grille. She bends over the cello, bows the open C string. A sustained, aboriginal drone.

CRANDON

Mina.

MARGERY stops, turns, her face in shadow.

CRANDON

We've had a telegram... from Scientific American.

CRANDON moves into the room.

CRANDON

They've requested another sitting.

(then)

With Houdini.

MARGERY stiffens, lays the bow down.

CRANDON

The sitting is now a condition of the prize.

MARGERY extends her arm, her fingers tremble slightly. CRANDON puts the glass in her hand.

CRANDON

I think we have to view this as an opportunity given us by God. Convince Houdini, and you've convinced the world.

MARGERY

(drinks)

You mean Walter must convince him.

CRANDON

Yes... It will be the last seance. I promise.

As MARGERY finishes the wine, WE CUT TO:

A monstrous, rushing sound. HOUDINI is being sucked down boiling rapids, battered against rocks.

EXT. NIAGARA FALLS -- DAY

HOUDINI is fighting his way to a frail young woman clinging for her life to a tree stump wedged in mid-stream. As HOUDINI reaches her, we pull back to reveal: the edge of the falls just a dozen yards away. Thunderous. Terrifying.

HOUDINI pries her hands off the stump. He and the young woman are instantly seized by the current, swept toward the edge. We hear frantic off-screen voices, but they are drowned by the deafening roar. The water swirls around them; inches away, a drop of hundreds of feet to jagged rocks. The woman is screaming, hysterical.

Impossibly, HOUDINI swims against the roaring torrent. He lifts the woman to safety -- the safety of a camera platform. Grips reach down, pull the half-conscious ACTRESS from the river. We reveal that HOUDINI is attached to a lifeline -- a steel cable hooked to a harness under his shirt. JIM COLLINS (50s) wiry, raw-boned, works the winch.

HOUDINI

(yells)

Did you get it?

COLLINS

(Cockney: over the din)

That's what we was tryin' to tell you, Mr. H. They had a jam -- the film jammed.

A beat. HOUDINI's face darkens, looks up at the CAMERAMAN.

HOUDINI

You didn't get it.

A maternal make-up woman cradles the ACTRESS in a blanket, waves smelling salts under her nose. HOUDINI unhooks the lifeline, athletically swings himself to the platform. A crowd of spectators applauds from behind a police cordon.

As HOUDINI waves to them:

HOUDINI

We go again.

ACTRESS

(shrieks)

No, no, no!

HOUDINI

But, Millicent, your acting was swell.

ACTRESS

(thick Jersey accent)

Who was acting?!

HOUDINI

I'm sorry, but it can't be helped.

ACTRESS

That's easy for you to say -- you're attached to the cable!

HOUDINI

Millicent--

ACTRESS

It's crazy, Mr. Houdini -- I can't do it no more! T'ree times we done it an' every time you get closer!

HOUDINI

Millicent, sweetheart, the closer you get, the more they believe it.

The ACTRESS rips off her golden bottle-curl wig.

ACTRESS

Well screw them, and screw you too, Mr. Bigshot! I don't give a rat's ass what any of ya's believe!

She stalks off the platform. HOUDINI turns to COLLINS.

HOUDINI

Collins -- who loaded the film?

COLLINS points to the camera assistant.

COLLINS

It was Dutch.

A beat.

HOUDINI

Dutch...

DUTCH

Yessir, Mr. Houdini.

HOUDINI

(through his teeth)

Put the wig on.

DUTCH

Me?

HOUDINI

I'm a week behind and forty thousand dollars over budget.

HOUDINI throws him the wig.

DUTCH

But Mr. Houdini, there's something you gotta know. I can't act.

HOUDINI

Can you swim?

DUTCH

No...

HOUDINI

Perfect.

(yells)

We go again in fifteen minutes!

Off DUTCH--

EXT./INT. DRESSING ROOM -- DAY -- MOMENTS LATER

A tiny makeshift structure on Prospect Point; the rumble of the falls in the background. The grip truck is parked nearby, emblazoned with a huge poster: "The Man From Beyond starring THE GREAT HOUDINI". His face glares out from the poster, a steely-eyed stare.

HOUDINI is toweling off, changing into an identical outfit. BESS heats coffee on a camping stove.

HOUDINI
So how's my acting?

BESS
The truth? It was awful.
(kisses him)
And Millicent's right, you're getting too close to the edge.

HOUDINI
The hell with that -- I'm going over. I'm doing the falls. Hand me the Hindoo, wouldya, honey?

BESS hands him a small paper packet. HOUDINI fits it into his mouth, begins swallowing needles.

HOUDINI
You go with the surge, it's like a cannon. You shoot out over the rocks and you go into the pool.

BESS
Could you not do that right before lunch?

HOUDINI
(talking past the needles)
"Houdini Conquers Niagara". And he does it straight, not in some tricked up barrel rig.

BESS
Nobody does Niagara straight -- it's gotta be tricked.

HOUDINI pulls a string of threaded needles from his mouth.

HOUDINI
That's what makes it worthy of Houdini. It's not a trick.

BESS
Everything's a trick!

HOUDINI removes the loose needles and thread and the packet from his mouth.

HOUDINI
The carette wasn't.

BESS
(stops)
Please... not this again. Every time you wanna break your neck, you drag this out.

HOUDINI
I dropped the pick. You tell me how I got out.

BESS
You were freezing, you were gonna die. You stuck your leg out the window, you -- I dunno -- dislocated your hip or something. You know how you did it!

HOUDINI
I'm telling you I don't. I can't explain it.

BESS slaps a sandwich and a glass of milk in front of him.

BESS
Ehrie, everybody's had experiences they can't explain. That's why people come to our shows. No matter how mystified they are, they know Houdini understands how it's done. Houdini knows there's nothing hiding in the dark.

HOUDINI
There was something there, Bess. And whatever it was... it helped me get out.

BESS turns away from him.

HOUDINI
You're a Catholic, I'm a Jew. We have to believe it could happen.

BESS

With God, yes. But you're talking about psychic experience -- the bunk the mediums peddle. How do you know when something like that is real?

HOUDINI

I'll know. I'll know when I hear it in a language I can't deny. When it says "Ehrie, this is not a dream."

BESS

You mean when your mother says that.

A beat. HOUDINI looks up at her.

HOUDINI

Yes... anything short of that is...

HOUDINI pours the milk into his fist, blows on it. He holds up his hand, opens it: empty.

WE CUT TO:

A memory. A gray, grim ghetto neighborhood on the upper east side of New York.

HOUDINI (13) is doing card tricks on a street corner. A make-shift table, a scavenged bowler hat, a crude sign: "Ehrich Weiss -- King of Cards". A rapid song-like patter: "Pick-a-card-any-card-any-card-at-all".

Then QUICK CUTS: as EHRICH runs through his repertoire of tricks. Amazing skill, speed, presence for his age. Coins drop into the hat.

EXT./INT. TENEMENT -- DAY -- (MEMORY)

EHRICH darts into the run-down facade, hurries along a decrepit corridor. Shouted arguments, ragged children, dirty blue shadows.

Then: he opens the door to the courtyard. Row upon row of wetwash glowing white in the sun. A criss-crossed labyrinth of shimmering sheets. EHRICH wades into it, pushing the sheets aside, eagerly searching.

EHRICH

Mama...?

Then, deep among the folds, he sees his mother -- CECILIA WEISS (40s) bent over a basket of laundry. The curtain of white surrounds her. EHRICH stops, squints against the glow.

Then: she turns, framed by white billows, smiles. Like an angel.

CECILIA

Ehrie... wo bist du, mein kind?

EHRICH runs up to her. In Hungarian Yiddish, subtitled:

EHRICH

Mama -- you don't have to do other people's laundry anymore. Shake me.

CECILIA looks at him, puzzled.

EHRICH

Shake me -- I'm magic!

She shakes him gently by the shoulders -- coins fall from his hair, his clothes, behind his ears, up his sleeves.

CECILIA begins laughing, delighted. As she bends down to hug him, a single clothespin falls from her apron.

CECILIA

Yes, Ehrie, you are magic.

EHRICH picks up the clothespin, beams at his mother:

HOUDINI (V.O.)

Ladies and gentlemen... you are about to witness the most extraordinary escape ever attempted!

INT. ORPHEUM THEATRE -- PITTSBURGH -- NIGHT

A hot spotlight: HOUDINI onstage. He is wearing his trademark sleeveless tuxedo, speaking in his stentorian stage voice.

HOUDINI

(a sweep of his arm)

The Ancient Chinese Water Torture Cell!

The curtain opens, revealing BESS standing next to a tall glass-fronted cabinet filled with water. Iron bars enclose the inside. A over-sized clock with a second hand hangs stage left.

As HOUDINI continues, two female assistants begin undressing him.

HOUDINI

It is an escape from certain death. For death awaits me in that cabinet as surely as it awaits each of you...

The girls remove his shirt. We notice that many of the audience members are schoolgirls -- frenzied, on the edge of their seats. HOUDINI is the rock star of his age.

HOUDINI

It is a nightmare death. Watery and lonely. From which reason would say there can be no escape!

One of the assistants undoes his pants, slips them down. He steps out, naked except for a jock strap.

CLOSE: a young woman in the audience faints.

HOUDINI

(turns slowly)

You can see there is nothing concealed about my person.

(then)

Gentlemen... the manacles!

Three male assistants in brocade uniforms cuff him, clamp his legs with a heavy wooden yoke. HOUDINI raises his arms, displays the shackles to the audience. JIM COLLINS attaches a block and tackle to the yoke.

HOUDINI

When I am lowered into the torture cell, I want each of you to take a deep breath and hold it for as long as you can...

HOUDINI leans back in his assistants' arms. Suddenly, he is violently yanked upside down. The audience gasps as HOUDINI swings over the cell.

HOUDINI

And as the last of you exhales, reflect that the breath may have left my body too... forever!

A blackout. An eerie light snaps on beneath the cell.

HOUDINI fills his lungs as he is lowered, water splashing around the cabinet. Atop a ladder, an assistant padlocks an iron grille over the yoke.

We hold on HOUDINI, naked, submerged and manacled. The audience is literally holding its breath. A uniformed New York FIREMAN takes up his position in front of the cabinet, gripping a fire axe.

The light beneath the cell goes off. Spotlights sweep over the stage. All we can see inside the cabinet are momentary glints of bubbles. Then, timed to avoid the swirling spotlights:

HOUDINI, submerged, smacks the cuffs against the iron bars; they fall open. He violently contorts his body, claws his way up the bars to reach the top of the cabinet. He undoes a hidden catch, which frees his feet. He turns upright, slides open the yoke, lifts the grille, and crawls out through the narrow opening.

Deftly avoiding the spotlights, HOUDINI climbs down behind the cabinet, replaces the yoke and grille, checks the locks. He drops to his knees; a hand lifts the curtain behind him. He quickly slips underneath.

ONSTAGE: COLLINS stands near the FIREMAN, watching the clock.

COLLINS

(calls: Cockney accent)

One minute...

QUICK CUTS: Audience members holding their breath.

INT. ORPHEUM THEATRE -- BACKSTAGE -- NIGHT

HOUDINI wears a robe, a towel over his head as he reads the newspaper. BESS is nearby with a schedule of engagements.

BESS

(quietly)

We have Detroit tomorrow and Thursday.
Then Chicago for the weekend...

HOUDINI

(over his glasses)

How many shows?

BESS

Seven... one's a benefit for the Elks.

HOUDINI

I thought we were supposed to be making money on this tour.

ONSTAGE: COLLINS looks with elaborate anxiety at the clock.

COLLINS

Three minutes and thirty seconds!

The audience is growing more and more restless. Someone yells -- "Let him out!". Others chime in.

BACKSTAGE: HOUDINI flips through the newspaper. Stops. A full-page spread on MARGERY, dominated by a formal portrait.

CLOSE on HOUDINI: as we gaze for the first time at the face of MARGERY -- MINA CRANDON. Youthful, sincere, enigmatic, and deeply sensual. A moment.

Then the headlines: "Margery Identified!", "Witch of Lime Street Baffles Experts". HOUDINI turns the page: his own picture and huge headlines: "Houdini Stumped", "Magician Challenges Medium -- Then Pulls Vanishing Act".

HOUDINI

(stunned: whispers)

The bastards. Look at this...

HOUDINI hands the paper to BESS.

BESS

Conan Doyle wouldn't pull a stunt like this.

HOUDINI

But Frost would -- he acts like he's in love with her.

(paces: then)

I'm going to Boston. Call the Herald and the Times. And cancel the rest of the tour.

BESS

(a furious whisper)

What about Chicago?! We're sold out!

HOUDINI

(hisses back)

The hell with Chicago!

ONSTAGE: The FIREMAN is staring nervously at COLLINS. The audience is frantic, some stand -- "Smash it -- smash the glass!"

COLLINS
Five minutes, thirty seconds!

BACKSTAGE:

BESS
You sunk all our money into your *fecoctah* film company -- we gotta do this tour just to break even!

HOUDINI
They're using Houdini's name to promote a fraud.

BESS
They're just baiting you!

HOUDINI
I want every piece of information I can get on this Margery.

COLLINS (O.S.)
Six minutes! The Great Houdini has been submerged for six full minutes!

HOUDINI
I'm going and that's final!

We hear the audience -- frenzied, shouting. HOUDINI drops the robe and towel.

HOUDINI
Water.

BESS
You want the water?

HOUDINI
I want the water.

BESS
You got it.

BESS picks up a bucket, heaves the water at him.

HOUDINI
(through his teeth)
Thank you.

A TIME CUT:

BESS
(dashes onstage)
For God's sake, break the glass! It's been
seven minutes!

The crowd is screaming. The FIREMAN rears back with his axe -- smashes the glass. The lights flash on as a thousand gallons of water pour onto the stage: the torture cell is empty. Gasps.

The doors at the back of the theater are thrown open. HOUDINI jogs down the center aisle, dripping wet. He leaps onto the stage, raises his arms. Then, he throws back his head and laughs. And the crowd goes crazy.

INT. CAR -- BOSTON -- NIGHT

COLLINS turns down Charles Street, HOUDINI and BESS in the back.

BESS
Margery's mother died giving birth to her. She and her brother Walter were raised by their father. He was a faith healer and a drunken, violent sonofabitch. Beat the hell out of the kids until somebody slit his throat, nearly cut his head off.

COLLINS looks back through the rear-view.

COLLINS
That's pleasant...

HOUDINI
Who did it?

BESS
It was never solved. But everybody assumed it was Walter. That he did it to protect his sister.

HOUDINI
What about Walter?

BESS

He died within a few days of his father. Fell under a train; Margery was the only witness. For a coupla years she lived in a Methodist orphanage. When she was fifteen she married the minister who ran it. Divorced him two years later for -- guess what -- beating her.

HOUDINI

Just like dear old Dad.

BESS

Said she was in league with the devil. He beat her so bad one time, they had to take her to the hospital. It was Dr. Crandon that performed surgery on her.

HOUDINI

Surgery? What kind of surgery?

BESS

Gynecological. The minister kicked her so hard she could never have children.

COLLINS

Bloody 'ell...

BESS

Crandon married her six months later. That's when she became a medium.

HOUDINI thinks a moment, then:

HOUDINI

Where is this minister? I wanna talk to him.

BESS

He's dead. A week after Margery divorced him, somebody cut his throat.

Off HOUDINI, grim--

INT. LIME STREET HOUSE -- LIBRARY -- NIGHT

NOKUCHI, the CRANDONS' Japanese butler, serves drinks to FROST, LIME and CONAN DOYLE. NOKUCHI's WIFE shows HOUDINI in.

He is followed by BESS and COLLINS.

CONAN DOYLE

Thank you for coming, Harry.

HOUDINI

Houdini's name has been used without permission.

FROST

I thought "Houdini" was a household word.

CONAN DOYLE

It was a misunderstanding--

HOUDINI

(turns on Frost)

You pulled a cheap trick on me to get publicity for your star attraction.

FROST

I deny that... categorically.

HOUDINI

You'll apologize for it... *publicly*.

BIRD

I think you should apologize to the Crandons for your insinuation.

HOUDINI

You want publicity? I can have fifty reporters in here tonight, goddamnit!

CRANDON

Gentlemen, this is a Christian household.

CRANDON moves into the room, self-assured, impeccably tailored.

CRANDON

And we are here for a religious service.

CONAN DOYLE

Harry, this is Dr. Le Roi Crandon.

HOUDINI

Are you aware of the Times article, Doctor?

CRANDON

I am painfully aware of it.

FROST

Houdini has accused me of planting it.

HOUDINI

I want Professor Frost barred from the seance.

BIRD

Houdini, really--

HOUDINI

He's out or I'm out.

CRANDON

May I remind you, Mr. Houdini, that you are here at my invitation. The seance room is a sacred place. I will determine the conditions of the sitting.

HOUDINI

That's what I'm afraid of.

CRANDON

I beg your pardon--

MARGERY

It's all right, Le Roi...

Everyone turns: MARGERY is in the doorway. Stunning. Transcendently peaceful. Her red-gold hair is tied in a scarlet ribbon. She wears a floor-length silk gown, ornately embroidered satin slippers. An unnatural sparkle is in her eyes.

MARGERY

Mr. Houdini is upset. Understandably.

HOUDINI

Mrs. Crandon, my reputation has been called into question on your account.

MARGERY moves close to HOUDINI.

MARGERY

But not by me... never by me. I have the greatest respect for you. And the greatest hopes for our liaison. Nothing must be allowed to interfere.

BESS watches as MARGERY looks deeply into HOUDINI's eyes.

MARGERY

Please... forgive us. If not for my sake, then for the sake of the truth.

HOUDINI

(after a beat)

Very well.

MARGERY turns to FROST, takes his hands.

MARGERY

You see, Daniel, everything's settled. Isn't it?

FROST

(mesmerized)

Of course, Mina. You look... resplendent.

MARGERY brushes his lips with hers, then turns:

MARGERY

Lovely to see you again, Dr. Bird. Thank you for coming, Sir Arthur.

(then)

And this must be Mrs. Houdini... You're so fortunate to be married to the most famous man in the world.

BESS

It has its moments. This is one of them. From what I hear, you've got quite a following yourself.

MARGERY

I didn't choose my calling. It chose me.

BESS

Just like the circus.

An uncomfortable moment.

CRANDON

Are you a Christian, Mrs. Houdini?

BESS

I was raised Catholic but I got better.

CRANDON

(looks at her)

"I am adrift among the dead and cannot get out. But Thou shalt work Thy wonders in the dark". Psalm 88.

(then)

This is an important evening for all of us. Perhaps we should begin...

HOUDINI

My assistant, Mr. Collins has designed an apparatus which I would like to use in the seance.

COLLINS holds up a black box with a hinged lid.

HOUDINI

(to Crandon)

With your permission...

CRANDON

Nothing was said about an apparatus. What is it?

COLLINS

It's very simple really. There's a bell inside the box. All your... uh... deceased brother-in-law needs do is press down on the lid.

COLLINS presses the lid, rings the bell.

MARGERY

I'm sure Walter won't be offended.

MARGERY moves close to HOUDINI, a deep sincerity in her eyes.

MARGERY

In fact, Mr. Houdini, he's thrilled that you've come. He hopes to prove to you that it is possible to lift the curtain which separates this world from the next.

HOUDINI

I've seen a lot of people try... but no one's ever done it.

MARGERY takes his hand, a serene smile.

MARGERY

Come with me...

HOUDINI exchanges a glance with BESS as MARGERY leads him out of the library. COLLINS watches MARGERY as the others follow her out.

COLLINS

(turns to Bess)

Stroof' -- if 'at's a medium, I'm bloody well a believer.

BESS

I got a twenty says the robe is off before the lights go down.

WE CUT TO:

The needle of a Victrola. Rhythmic surface noise, then "Souvenir" begins. A strange, maudlin nocturne. Sentimental, pedestrian, but somehow romantic. MARGERY's favorite song.

INT. LIME STREET HOUSE -- SEANCE ROOM -- NIGHT

NOKUCHI moves away from the Victrola, begins lighting candles as DR. CRANDON leads the sitters into the small room: CONAN DOYLE, FROST, BIRD and HOUDINI. Heavy black curtains, leather-bound books.

One end of the room is dominated by the "Cabinet", a low platform backed by a three-sided black screen. Five chairs around a small circular table.

CRANDON

If you would be kind enough to take your places at the table, my wife will join us shortly.

HOUDINI

The usual circle... holding hands?

CONAN DOYLE

Harry, you promised to keep an open mind.

HOUDINI

I'm as open as a grave, Sir Arthur.

NOKUCHI moves to the table with the bell box.

CRANDON

Would you like your apparatus on the table, Mr. Houdini?

HOUDINI

Actually I'd prefer to keep it with me... between my feet.

CRANDON watches as HOUDINI places the bell box on the floor. Then he takes a photograph from the mantle, hands it to HOUDINI.

CRANDON

The medium's spirit guide is her late brother Walter.

CLOSE on the photograph: WALTER. Robust yet strangely solemn. Full face, thick hair. Pale eyes, almost translucent.

HOUDINI

Looks like Jack Armstrong, the All-American boy.

HOUDINI gives the picture back to CRANDON.

CRANDON

Walter was killed in a railway accident eight years ago at the age of twenty.

HOUDINI

Coach or first class?

FROST

Mina was devastated. They were very close.

CRANDON

Although they were as unlike as a brother and sister could be. As you will discover, Mr. Houdini.

The door opens: MARGERY. She is wearing a white dressing gown, her hair wound in a scarlet ribbon. The men stand. She moves to HOUDINI, puts her hands on his shoulders, kisses his cheek.

MARGERY
(whispers in his ear)
At last... At so long last.

HOUDINI
Mrs. Crandon... would you agree to being
searched before the seance begins?

MARGERY
I think you'll find that won't be
necessary.

HOUDINI watches as MARGERY removes the dressing gown, revealing a short, gossamer kimono. She moves to her chair in the Cabinet, never taking her eyes from his as she undoes the scarlet ribbon. Her hair falls around her shoulders.

MARGERY
You may control me now.

MARGERY lays her hands, palms up, on the table. BIRD and FROST take her hands. Then she spreads her legs; they put their feet on hers. CONAN DOYLE and HOUDINI complete the circle.

CRANDON takes his position in the shadows by the mantle. He nods to NOKUCHI, who leaves, quietly closes the door. Then CRANDON turns down the electric lights, leaving only the candles. He moves into the shadows.

MARGERY
(slowly: to Houdini)
I wish I were a great magician so I could
do... wondrous tricks...

MARGERY is closing her eyes, slipping into trance.

MARGERY
...but all that I can do... is sleep.

Her head falls back, the kimono separates, revealing the curve of her breasts. Her breathing slows, becomes deeper. Throaty sighs.

The shifting shadows make the seance room seem even smaller. For a long moment no one speaks. No one moves. There is no sound in the flickering half-light but the music and MARGERY's breathing. Then: an unearthly whistling from a far corner. A mocking obbligato to "Souvenir".

HOUDINI glances around, then looks closely at MARGERY: deep in trance, her mouth immobile as the whistling grows louder. He looks up at CRANDON, a silhouette in the shadows. The whistling stops. The only sound is the tick of the Victrola.

Then, a VOICE:

WALTER

Judas priest, what a sappy tune!

CONAN DOYLE jumps. WALTER's voice is gruff but youthful, reminiscent of MARGERY's. But deeper, breathier.

WALTER

But "the Kid" loves it. Just like her -- sweet, simple... hopelessly romantic... Crandon, turn that goddamn machine off. It's interfering with my vibrations!

CRANDON's silhouette moves to the Victrola. HOUDINI watches him, then runs his eyes over the darkened room. Peers at the curtains, then back at MARGERY. Her lips part slightly, her head lolls onto her chest.

WALTER

Who's in the bleachers tonight? Sherlock, Birdie and Danny-boy...

We scan their faces in the candlelight.

WALTER

And this must be... The Master Mystifier... the King of Cuffs... the Emperor of Escape... The Great Houdini...

Then the voice moves directly behind HOUDINI, whispers.

WALTER

Or is it just Ehrich Weiss, the washerwoman's little boy?

HOUDINI turns. Nothing.

BIRD

Walter... we've invited Mr. Houdini here because--

WALTER

I know why he's here! To see for himself. Absolute proof. Well, hold on tight, Harry, the show's about to start.

The table begins to vibrate, then shake violently.

WALTER

Red light, Crandon!

CRANDON's silhouette moves to the mantelpiece, throws a switch: a strobing red light. In it we see the seance table levitate three feet off the floor. It turns sideways, the legs pointed at HOUDINI. Then it floats toward MARGERY, balances on her knees, tilts against her forehead.

HOUDINI is impressed; the others are in awe. The table remains stationary for a moment. Then it drops to the floor with a thud. The strobing stops.

WALTER

Top that, Harry.

HOUDINI

I have... before kings and queens--

WALTER

Don't give me that kings and queens crap!

A spirit trumpet appears above them, moves slowly toward HOUDINI.

WALTER

(through the trumpet)

You've got a factory, technicians and all the money in the world.

(melodramatic)

I'm just a poor little disembodied spirit in the attic of a house.

HOUDINI

You're going to have to prove that to me, Walter.

Suddenly, the trumpet lurches up as if it's going to strike HOUDINI. Then it sails across the room, barely misses his head, smashes the globe of a lamp.

Silence. Then, urgent, rapid whispers:

FROST

It's getting cold in here, very cold. Do you feel it?

BIRD

Yes... I feel it--

CONAN DOYLE

Something touched my neck--

BIRD

And mine--

FROST

And that odor--

BIRD

I don't smell it--

FROST

It's suffocating--

BIRD

Yes... now--

FROST

Decay--

CONAN DOYLE

I smelled it on the battlefields in France. When I went to look for my son...

HOUDINI

Are you doing that Walter?

WALTER

It ain't the Duchess of Windsor, sport.

HOUDINI

(the trace of a smile)

Well, you'll have to do much better.

WALTER

God, you are a cynical sonofabitch.

The curtains begin moving as if in a rising wind.

WALTER

Have you ever wondered what it's like on the other side, Harry?

HOUDINI

Sometimes...

WALTER

Baloney. You're obsessed with it.

MARGERY stirs, as if having a bad dream. An eerie light rises from the table.

WALTER

If you have questions why don't you ask me?

HOUDINI

Because I don't believe you're on the other side, Walter.

WALTER

Then why don't you ask your mother, Ehrie?! She's definitely dead.

The windows begin rattling, the furniture is shaking.

WALTER

That's why you really came, isn't it? To find her? To see if I could lead you to her?

HOUDINI

Can you?

Suddenly: a bookshelf topples over -- smashes on the floor. BIRD looks at CONAN DOYLE, clearly frightened. MARGERY is moaning now -- the dream has become a nightmare.

CONAN DOYLE

For God's sake, Harry, stop provoking him.

HOUDINI

He's dead, Sir Arthur, what could he possibly do to us?

WALTER

(growls)

If I wanted to, I could rip off the top floor of this house and throw it into the bay!

The walls are trembling now. FROST, BIRD and CONAN DOYLE hang on to each other. Terrified.

HOUDINI

All right. I apologize, Walter. I'm sorry...

Everything stops.

WALTER

That's more like it. Are you satisfied now, Houdini?

HOUDINI

Just one more thing. I've brought you something--

WALTER

I know. A Jim Collins special.

CLOSE: on the bell box between HOUDINI's feet.

HOUDINI

Ring the bell, Walter.

WALTER

What do you think I am, a trained seal?

HOUDINI

If it's too complicated for you--

WALTER

Don't patronize me, you sideshow geek!

(then)

Is she controlled?

BIRD and FROST grip MARGERY's hands.

FROST

Yes.

BIRD

Yes., Walter.

MARGERY leans back, slips her feet out of the slippers. Then:

CONAN DOYLE

Walter... your sister has her bare feet...
in my lap.

WALTER

Lucky you. Are we ready?

A moment. MARGERY half turns in her chair. Then: *the bell rings.*
CONAN DOYLE looks at HOUDINI.

HOUDINI

Again please...

MARGERY straightens: *the bell rings again.*

BIRD

Are you satisfied now?

HOUDINI

Yes...

(then)

I'm satisfied this is as cheap a fraud as
I've ever seen.

FROST

That's a lie--

HOUDINI

I took the precaution of rolling up my
trouser leg. I felt her leg brush against
mine.

WALTER

You sonofabitch!

HOUDINI

You can stop it now, Walter.

WALTER

Oh, I'm just getting started! Do you want to see what brushed against your leg!?

As he speaks the bell box is levitating onto the table. CONAN DOYLE, BIRD and FROST stare, mystified.

WALTER

Do you really want to see how I did it?
How 'bout it, Harry?

MARGERY falls back in her chair, deep in trance. As HOUDINI watches: MARGERY's legs fall open. Then: her kimono begins moving, ruffled from beneath.

MARGERY

Walter... please. Please stop it...

WALTER

Crandon! The light, damnit!

MARGERY

Walter, it hurts--

The red light begins strobing again.

Then: from under MARGERY's kimono, a shape appears. Dark, amorphous, glowing as it stretches toward the table.

CONAN DOYLE

(an awed whisper)

It's the ectoplasm.

CLOSE: from the side: the ectoplasm extends across the table like an eel. Writhing, bending, reaching.

HOUDINI watches, fascinated as the cleft end of the ectoplasm hovers over the bell box.

MARGERY's mouth is hanging open. Her body is gyrating, her muscles contracting.

WALTER

You want me to ring your bell, Harry? I'll ring your goddamn bell!

en: the ectoplasm forms a crude fist. Begins pounding on the d of the bell box. Frantic ringing fills the room.

MARGERY is panting, face contorted.

MARGERY

No, no--

CONAN DOYLE

Stop it, Walter, please!

HOUDINI wrenches his arm from FROST's grip.

FROST

What in God's name are you doing?!

HOUDINI lunges across the table, seizes the ectoplasmic arm.
Then: MARGERY is shrieking, her body jolting in pain.

CONAN DOYLE

My God--

BIRD

Crandon -- put the lights on!

WALTER

No -- no light!

MARGERY is gripping the ectoplasm with her free hand, screaming.
HOUDINI lets go: the ectoplasm immediately shrivels, seems to recede into MARGERY's body.

HOUDINI

(jumps up)

I want to examine her!

CONAN DOYLE

For God's sake, Harry--

FROST

She's still in trance!

HOUDINI

Mrs. Crandon, I demand to examine you now!

Suddenly, MARGERY jolts up. Her eyes snap open. Everyone stops.
In the half-light her face seems changed, subtly but unmistakably. Her eyes are hollow, her skin is unnaturally pale.

Then her lips are moving like an automaton: a VOICE is speaking through her. Breathier, more distant.

A double voice -- male and female -- seems to be manipulating her vocal chords like cello strings.

MARGERY/VOICE

You won't find anything here. You won't find me here.

HOUDINI looks on, amazed. MARGERY moans, deep in trance. She convulses as her lips move again:

MARGERY/VOICE

I'm not a magician. I'll take you behind the curtain. But only if you believe...

(a maternal whisper)

De darsst gleiben, Ehrie...

(then)

You must believe, Houdini...

CLOSE: on HOUDINI, clearly disturbed. He glances down at the table, an object lies between his hands.

A clothespin. Ancient, weathered.

CRANDON switches on the electric light. The room is suddenly silent.

MARGERY is coming out of the trance. She puts her hands on the arms of the chair, painfully raises herself to her feet. She looks at the men, not focusing. Then her eyes find HOUDINI.

HOUDINI

(softly)

Mrs. Crandon, I must insist on examining you now.

She stares at him a moment. Then she leans forward, clutches the pit of her stomach. And vomits.

HOUDINI and the others are stunned. A horrible moment.

MARGERY gapes at them, raises her hand to her mouth in disgust. And shame. Then she moves to the door; CRANDON stops her, grips her arms, glaring. She pulls away, runs from the room.

HOUDINI looks down: the clothespin. An imperceptible gesture -- as he palms it, WE CUT TO:

An identical seance table levitating in a strobing red light. HOUDINI makes magical passes with his hands as the table pivots toward him. Stops suddenly.

HOUDINI
(frowns)
Balance it on my knees.

COLLINS
Right, Mr. H...

INT. HOUDINI'S HOUSE -- PRIVATE WORKSHOP -- NEW YORK -- NIGHT

COLLINS stands outside the circle of red light, manipulating the table with wires attached to his fingers.

As COLLINS floats the table to HOUDINI, we see more of the secret workshop. Bizarre shadows from HOUDINI's magical effects -- coffins, skeletons, automatons. The repository of his most prized illusions.

COLLINS
My guess is it's the Japper rigged the table. 'em people's very clever wif' puppets...

COLLINS twirls the table in the air, lowers toward HOUDINI.

COLLINS
One time in 'okkaido, I seen a kabuki puppetmaster simulate a menage a trois wif' life-sized marionettes, usin' nuffin' but 'is two hands and 'is tongue...

COLLINS rests the table on HOUDINI's knees.

HOUDINI
Hold it there.

COLLINS
You want the supernatural glow now?

HOUDINI
Set it down first.

As COLLINS rests the table on the floor, the top begins glowing.

COLLINS

I could make it pulsate, but I'm flat out of rheostats.

HOUDINI picks up a spirit trumpet, sails it across the room.

COLLINS

Now the shakin' walls and windows -- 'at sounds like an interesting effect.

HOUDINI watches the trumpet fly back, catches it.

HOUDINI

Crandon built the seance room after they were married.

(shrugs)

Probably had it balanced on springs. Fans for the curtains, speaking tubes for the voice...

COLLINS

Sounds like this Margery puts on one 'elluva show.

HOUDINI

(shakes his head)

She's just the misdirection. That's why the see-through nightie. Everbody cops a peep while the crew runs the show.

COLLINS

How many of 'em do you think there is?

HOUDINI

(ticks them off)

One to trick the stunts, one to do the voice... and Frost. Our little Harvard boy plants the suggestions -- the room getting cold, the smell... And he tried to stop me touching the "ectoplasm".

COLLINS

What about that stuff? Liver and lights?

HOUDINI

No... way better. It moved, it grew. And when I touched it, it felt alive.

COLLINS
(impressed)
I'll get to work on it.

HOUDINI
Tomorrow... go home and get some sleep.

COLLINS picks up his jacket as HOUDINI moves to the wall -- it opens. They step into the darkened parlor.

INT. HOUDINI'S HOUSE -- PARLOR -- NIGHT

Firelight glints off a wall of handcuffs and manacles as it closes behind them.

HOUDINI
Jim... do you think it's possible to
communicate with the other side?

COLLINS
(pulls on his jacket)
That'd be the ultimate trick, wouldn't it.

HOUDINI
Not a trick. I mean actual contact with
the dead.

A beat.

COLLINS
Inna Great War, I seen thousands of men
die. Some of them my close friends. They
was young, all they wanted was to live.
But I ain't 'eard a peep from any of 'em
since.

As COLLINS walks out, HOUDINI reaches in a pocket. The
clothespin.

INT. HOUDINI'S HOUSE -- BEDROOM -- NIGHT -- LATER

BESS stirs, restless. HOUDINI slumps in an overstuffed chair by
the fire, sketching. Intense, preoccupied.

CLOSE: on the drawing: the seance room, the table, the names of
the sitters.

BESS
(sleepy)
What are you doing?

HOUDINI
Figuring it out. I have to write a report
for the Psychic Committee.

BESS
Why don't you come figure me out for a
couple hours?

CLOSE: on the drawing: HOUDINI circles CRANDON's name by the
mantle.

HOUDINI
When the lights go down, Crandon and the
butler change places. Then Crandon goes
behind the walls and runs the show -- the
levitations, the shaking, the ectoplasm...

BESS
Right... now come to bed.

HOUDINI
That just leaves two questions: What's the
ectoplasm made of? And who does the voice?
There's gotta be a third person.

BESS
Margery.
(shrugs)
She's a ventriloquist.

HOUDINI
No... she might've thrown her voice up
till the end. But then she looked right at
me. And there were two voices...

BESS
Because she and Crandon were speaking at
the same time.

HOUDINI
But it was perfect -- they didn't miss a
beat.

SS sits up, resigned, lights a cigarette.

BESS

You said yourself, they're good. They synchronize the spiel. It's just part of the scam.

HOUDINI

You weren't up there, Bess. You didn't see it.

BESS

I saw enough in that house. Margery plays the men she sits with like a cheap violin.

HOUDINI

She spoke Yiddish. Hungarian Yiddish.

BESS

So they did research. Like we used to do when we did the mind reading act. Ehrie, your history's not exactly a secret.

HOUDINI

I found this on the table.

HOUDINI tosses the clothespin to BESS; she catches it effortlessly.

BESS

(looks at it)

Clothespin.

HOUDINI

It was after she spoke my mother's language.

A beat.

BESS

Look, "Walter" called her a washerwoman, right? So what would you have picked?

A moment. HOUDINI nods, stands. He takes a picture of his mother from the mantle, still disturbed.

HOUDINI

You know, I was way ahead of it right up to the end. Till she started speaking...

BESS

And then they did the finale. The big finish they knew would get to you. Mama.

HOUDINI sets the picture down.

HOUDINI

What do you think happens when you die, Bess?

BESS

I don't know. Nobody knows... It's a mystery. And it's probably better that way.

HOUDINI

But what about the love you have? What happens to that?

BESS

I think... the love stays with the living. As memories, wonderful memories...

HOUDINI

I need more than memories. Don't you?

BESS

Then you just have to believe.

HOUDINI

That's what Walter said to me. And he said it in Hungarian Yiddish.

BESS

There is no Walter. It's just a voice in the dark.

HOUDINI

That's all we are, Bess. Unless somebody answers... I need somebody to answer.

HOUDINI looks back at the picture of his mother.

WE CUT TO:

HOUDINI in chains. Handcuffs. Leg shackles. Ball-and-chain. A ledge. Stark superstructure. Six stories below, ripples blown back by the wind.

The span is packed, thousands of onlookers. Faces fraught with anxiety. Everyone is straining to get a look at HOUDINI. The crowd spills over into the streets. For an hour, the city has come to a halt.

Title: "Berlin, 1913"

EXT. BRIDGE -- BERLIN -- DAY (MEMORY)

HOUDINI is surrounded by a wall of German troops: spiked helmets, bayonets, Kaiser Bill mustaches. Stone-faced, scowling.

HOUDINI
(turns to Bess)
Kaiser's welcoming committee.

BESS
You know what they're thinking, don't you?
Jews don't do this.

HOUDINI
(the smile)
This Jew does.
(then)
How many jumps is this?

BESS
Thirteen, if you count our marriage. Ready?

HOUDINI kisses her. Then he steps to the edge, holds up his cuffs to the crowd.

HOUDINI
(German: subtitles)
Why do I do this, you wonder.

HOUDINI's voice echoes over the river.

HOUDINI
I will explain, and never forget: Even in chains, a man can make a leap of faith. Even surrounded by bayonets a man, any man, can still be free!

HOUDINI turns.

The tableau: HOUDINI, a tiny figure, poised on the railing.

Silence. Then: he jumps. And time stands still.

A POV: as we are hurtling toward the black water. Then: the impact. Bone-jarring. Like hitting a brick wall at sixty miles an hour.

IN RAPID CUTS: an escape by the numbers as HOUDINI sinks rapidly to the muck at the bottom of the river. He jackknifes, pulls his knees up to his chest. Works his hands underneath the iron ball at his feet. As he does, he comes out of the tuck, brings his hands forward, violently twists the cuffs. They open.

ON THE BRIDGE: An officer moves to BESS, hands her a telegram. She opens it. A moment. Her face grows solemn. Then she glances down at the water.

UNDERWATER: HOUDINI strips off the chains around his chest, his legs sinking into the gelatinous mud. Now knee-deep, he crouches, thrusts his arms down, groping for the iron ball. With tremendous effort, he pulls the ball-and-chain out of the clinging muck, wrenches it free.

I. BRIDGE -- DAY -- MOMENTS LATER

HOUDINI bobs to the surface. People on the span are calling out, pointing. Wild cheering. Boats are converging below. He waves triumphantly to BESS.

BESS looks down at him, clutching the telegram. Crying.

As HOUDINI looks up at her, WE CUT TO:

A horse-drawn hearse. HOUDINI walks behind wearing a yarmulke, BESS at his side. Other mourners follow as the hearse makes its way among the austere cenotaphs. Over this we hear the yizkor -- the prayer for the dead.

A SERIES OF SHOTS: the rabbi takes a piece of cloth from each of the mourners at the grave. HOUDINI drops a shovelful of earth onto the coffin as the yizkor continues.

EXT. MACHPELAH CEMETERY -- DAY (1913) -- LATER

HOUDINI stands alone over his mother's grave. CONAN DOYLE approaches, stops.

CONAN DOYLE

Harry...

HOUDINI turns to him, devastated.

HOUDINI

My mother was a saint. I didn't even get to say goodbye to her.

CONAN DOYLE

You will... But you must find a new way to speak to her. To touch her spirit.

(then)

Will you join me, Harry, in a search to find the truth? The truth about life after death?

HOUDINI gazes at him, hope in his eyes.

HOUDINI

Yes... yes... I will...

WE CUT TO:

A series of stills: magnesium flash black-and-white. HOUDINI attending seances. Mediums grimace, pose theatrically -- a cavalcade of phonies. As HOUDINI ages we watch his hope corrode into disbelief, despair, then cold cynicism.

Then: A pieta. A weeping, marble woman kneeling on the steps of a tomb. HOUDINI stands in silence holding flowers, staring at the name etched in the curving wall before him: "Cecilia Weiss 1842-1913".

EXT. MACHPELAH CEMETERY -- DAY -- THE PRESENT (1925)

HOUDINI carefully lays the bouquet on his mother's grave. Head bowed, he reaches for BESS's hand. A solemn moment.

Then: flashbulbs from behind. As HOUDINI turns, we reveal: half a dozen REPORTERS and PHOTOGRAPHERS, among them is HOAGLAND.

HOUDINI

(softly)

For twelve years I searched for somebody who could reach my mother on the other side. I've gone from medium to medium, seance to seance...

(shakes his head)

Nothing... nothing but cheap tricks and silence.

PHOTOGRAPHER

(gently)

Uh... can I get one of just you, Mr. Houdini? By the statue...

HOUDINI

Yeah, sure...

HOUDINI moves to the pieta. Flash.

HOAGLAND

Harry, I know this isn't the time to ask, but the whole country wants to know... is Margery real or not?

HOUDINI

I promised I wouldn't discuss that till the Psychic Committee completes its investigation.

HOAGLAND

Aw, c'mon, Harry. Houdini vs. Margery's the biggest story since Sacco and Vanzetti.

HOUDINI

I can't comment, Larry. But I'll say this: The only way anybody's ever gonna come back from the grave is the way Houdini's gonna do it. I'm gonna kick off the West Coast tour by accepting the L.A. Tribune's challenge -- the ultimate escape.

(then)

Buried Alive...

WE CUT TO:

HOUDINI lying with eyes closed, arms crossed, at the bottom of a deep, narrow crate.

HOUDINI

The key to it is the dust.

INT. KEITH THEATER -- LOS ANGELES -- BACKSTAGE -- NIGHT

Worklights glare from the flies. Strange, grotesque shadows -- scenery and props from HOUDINI's show are stacked everywhere. A crate is at the bottom of the stage's trap door. Poised over is a dumptruck full of sand.

COLLINS peers down, leaning against the inclined truck bed.

HOUDINI

You have to raise a good cloud of dust so
I can get to my knees without being seen...

As he speaks, HOUDINI gets into a crouch.

COLLINS

I'd say five or six shovels then...

HOUDINI

When you see me raise the shirt over my
head, call for the dump.

COLLINS

Right.

HOUDINI

And fill that damn hole fast. There's
gotta be enough sand so they don't see me
as I straighten up.

(then)

Bess!

BESS hurries over, carrying a billowy silk shirt.

BESS

I put a new zipper inside the collar.
It'll be easier to find.

She passes the shirt down to him. As he puts it on:

BESS

Once you're inside, it'll be just like a
tent. You'll have one cubic foot of air.

COLLINS

'at's 'four minutes. Tops...
(then)

How far you comin' up?

HOUDINI nearly straightens.

HOUDINI

To here. Exactly to here. That'll only
leave two inches of sand over my head.

BESS

We need a signal, Harry. Some way to know if there's trouble.

HOUDINI

If I don't come out, there's trouble.

BESS

That's not funny. There's no margin here. If you're not out in four, we're digging you out.

HOUDINI

If I'm not out in four, put up a nice headstone.

BESS

Could we get on with this? We're meeting the Barrymores for dinner.

HOUDINI

(lies down)

Yessss, dear..

He covers his face with a silk handkerchief, begins miming the trick.

HOUDINI

Shovel, shovel, shovel -- big cloud of dust... I'm on my feet... I'm in the crouch... You see the shirt... And...

BESS

Dump it.

COLLINS pulls the lever, the sand pours into the crate. It fills in seconds, sending a cloud of dust into the flies.

An echoing silence under the worklights. BESS looks at COLLINS.

COLLINS

No fear, Mrs. H. You could put your fingers in and scratch the top of his head.

A long moment. Then: BESS quickly crouches, feels under the sand with her fingers. Nothing.

BESS
He's not there.

COLLINS
'e should be slap inna middle.

BESS is frantically digging. COLLINS joins her, scooping at the sand. Then:

HOUDINI's severed head pops up behind them.

HOUDINI
I feel like rrrroast beef tonight. How
'bout you!?

EXT. ORANGE COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS -- DAY

HOUDINI stands before an open grave wearing a white linen suit, snap-brim Panama, black-and-white oxfords. He is flanked by COLLINS, BESS, PAPPAS, the theater owner and OTIS, publisher of the L.A. Tribune. And plenty of press.

Six workmen with shovels stand near a lumbering earth mover parked behind the huge pile of sand. The huge crowd is restrained by ropes stretched by policemen.

HOUDINI
(steps forward: intones)
What you are about to witness has never
been attempted by mortal man. Not since a
humble carpenter 1900 years ago has anyone
entered the grave and come out again!

Applause. HOUDINI turns theatrically. As BESS and COLLINS help him prepare, OTIS moves to him.

OTIS
What are you trying to pull, Houdini?

HOUDINI looks at him.

OTIS
(points)
That's not a grave -- it's only five feet
deep. Graves are six feet.

PAPPAS

(sweating profusely)

You see, Mr. Otis, they rehearsed it at five feet.

OTIS

I don't care what they rehearsed. I paid ten thousand dollars for an escape from a real grave.

HOUDINI

(furious)

What the hell do you care how deep it is? When I come out of that hole, your circulation is gonna triple!

OTIS

Are you going to duplicate the feat of Jesus or not?

BESS

Nobody paid four bucks a head to see the Sermon on the Mount. You want a miracle, go to church. You want publicity, you go to Houdini.

OTIS

You can always back out.

HOUDINI

I don't back out of anything.

PAPPAS

(frantic: whispers)

Mr. Otis, I got Houdini booked for five weeks. God forbid, something happens, like Jocko the Juggler says, my balls are in the air.

OTIS

Oh... I get it. You're pulling a Margery on me.

HOUDINI

A Margery?

OTIS
Yeah... you sell the spiritual and you deliver the scam.

BESS
Then why don't you get in the damn hole, Otis.

OTIS
Because I'm not Houdini; he is.

BESS
No, we are, you sonofabitch. And we're disappearing.

BESS starts off, HOUDINI stops her. He looks out at the crowd.

HOUDINI
No, Bess... the man's right. If it isn't six feet, it isn't a grave.

HOUDINI begins angrily stripping off his jacket, tie, shoes.
BESS and COLLINS move to him.

BESS
(urgently)
Ehrie, we need time to trick this.

HOUDINI
No tricks -- I'm doing it.

COLLINS
Mr. H. -- that's not two inches over your head, that's fourteen inches.

HOUDINI
(rips off his tie)
As long as I can get my hand out...

COLLINS
But you gotta reckon the weight. It's another ton of sand -- at least.

HOUDINI is now down to the billowing silk shirt, white trousers, barefoot. He looks like an acolyte ready for baptism. Or a body ready for burial.

HOUDINI
(turns to Bess)
Check my closings.

As BESS secures his cuffs and waistband:

BESS
What are you gonna push off of, Harry?
You'll have nothing under your feet but
loose sand.

HOUDINI
Then I'll swim out -- I've done it a
thousand times.
(snaps his fingers)
Kerchief.

COLLINS hands him the silk handkerchief.

BESS
You're not doing this because of what that
hack said about Margery.

HOUDINI
(fuming)
That jazzbo is not gonna make a liar out
of Houdini--

BESS
Don't do this. Don't do this for her.

HOUDINI
I'm not doing it for her... I'm doing it
for me.
(gestures to the crowd)
I'm doing it for them.

HOUDINI hands BESS the silver pocket watch.

HOUDINI
Four minutes.

HOUDINI waves the silk kerchief as he strides to the grave. Wild
cheering.

A TIME CUT: HOUDINI lays back in the grave. The earth mover's
engine rumbles above.

HOUDINI

Ready.

HOUDINI places the silk kerchief over his face. COLLINS signals the workmen, who begin shoveling the sand onto HOUDINI.

COLLINS

(grabs a shovel)

C'mon -- faster, faster!

As the sand pours in, a dense dust cloud rises.

CLOSE: on HOUDINI as he rolls over, crouches under the dust, pulls the shirt over his head.

COLLINS peers down: barely makes out HOUDINI in position.

COLLINS

Dump it -- c'mon! Now!

The earth mover roars forward, shoving the pile into the hole.

CLOSE: on BESS barely visible through the dust. She glances at the silver pocket watch.

COLLINS and the others stand back, sweating. The grave is filled. He looks over at BESS, then down at his watch.

Then: Underground. A waking nightmare. Ghostly images. Vague shapes. Clawing fingers. Arms wrestle suffocating curtains of sand. Chest heaving.

ABOVE: BESS is pacing, looking at the watch. The crowd is silent, like at a funeral. PAPPAS moves to COLLINS, wiping his face.

PAPPAS

(privately)

It's been three minutes...

COLLINS

(flat)

3:08.

OTIS

How long can he stay under?

COLLINS

Don't you read the papers, Mr. Otis? He's done six minutes under water.

OTIS

But that's just... publicity.

COLLINS

(glares)

Oh, nossir... that's magic.

The sound of a motor. BESS looks up: a bi-plane drifts lazily by, trailing a banner: "HOUDINI -- Keith Theater -- Tonight!" She looks down at the pocket watch.

CLOSE: as the second hand sweeps past.

BELOW: In the gravelly darkness. Lungs bursting. Mouth spasming, filling with sand. The flash of an eye. Panic. Primal terror.

Then: a blinding white light.

ABOVE: PAPPAS turns to COLLINS, hysterical.

PAPPAS

Enough, enough, dig him out!

OTIS closes his watch.

OTIS

I agree. No one could last this long.

BELOW: The white light ripples and shifts, an ethereal curtain. Then: the aboriginal hum. Modulating, growing louder.

Then: we are moving through the billowing sheets of light. Beyond it is darkness.

CLOSE: HOUDINI's eye, focusing, watching now.

Then: framed by the light, the darkness begins to take form. A face turning toward him. Familiar, reassuring, loving.

HOUDINI reaches out for it, reaches up.

ABOVE: COLLINS moves to BESS.

COLLINS

(softly)

We gotta bank this one, Mrs. H.

BESS

He'll never forgive me if I pull him out early.

COLLINS

We said four. It's comin' up 4:15 and it'll take 15 or 20 to get to 'im.

BESS looks at him.

PAPPAS

Mrs. Houdini, in God's name...

OTIS

Please.

Finally, BESS nods to COLLINS.

COLLINS

(yells)

Get your shovels, lads!

The workmen scramble toward the grave.

Then:

The sand begins to collapse. At first just a few grains. Then more and more, until a funnel has formed. And from that:

A hand emerges.

BESS steps forward. COLLINS waves the men back. The crowd is pressing toward the grave, straining at the police cordon.

The arm is growing. A second arm appears, shoving away the sand.

Then: HOUDINI.

The crowd is swarming around the grave. PAPPAS drops to his knees, crosses himself. COLLINS barks at the crowd to stay back.

CLOSE: on HOUDINI as they lift him out. Face caked with blood and sand. Fingernails torn off. Clothing shredded. Barely alive. He staggers, nearly falls.

BESS and COLLINS hold him up, half-carry him.

HOUDINI

(croaks)

I saw it, Bess... I saw it...

BESS

Saw what, Harry?

HOUDINI

I saw the curtain...

COLLINS

Steady on, Mr. H.

HOUDINI

It's a curtain, Bess, just like she
said... It's white...

OTIS steps in front of HOUDINI with a photographer, holds out ten crisp thousand-dollar bills. HOUDINI takes them, looks at them a long moment, hand trembling. Then: he drops the money into the grave.

The tableau: as he is led toward a waiting car. The crowd falls silent, parts reverently to make way for: THE GREAT HOUDINI.

WE CUT TO:

A cloudy white liquid, swirling. Then it is drawn from a large beaker into a pipette. DR. CRANDON stops the end of the glass straw with his finger.

INT. LIME STREET HOUSE -- DISPENSARY -- DAY

A laboratory in the basement with a private entrance on Lime Street. Shelves of medicines. A massive mahogany Philco plays Wagner. The shape of a corpse lies under a sheet on the metal examining table.

DR. CRANDON replaces a bottle in a barred, glass-fronted cabinet, closes the heavy padlock. A quiet knock. NOKUCHI comes in with a crystal glass on a salver. A crackle of static:

RADIO

We interrupt our musical program to bring
you a special bulletin.

(more)

RADIO (cont'd)

The famed magician, Harry Houdini, was nearly killed today in the performance of his latest escape...

NOKUCHI

Dr. Crandon--

CRANDON raises his hand, silences him.

RADIO

After spending almost five minutes buried alive in a freshly dug grave, Houdini collapsed and was rushed to the hospital...

CLOSE: on CRANDON, listening.

RADIO

Before leaving for California, Houdini had declined comment on his seance with the medium known as Margery. However, he hinted to reporters that he did not believe she was authentic...

NOKUCHI places the glass in front of CRANDON.

CLOSE: as CRANDON releases the liquid into the glass.

CRANDON

I'll be up in a moment. The Bordeaux will be fine.

NOKUCHI takes the glass, leaves. CRANDON moves to the examining table, pulls back the sheet: *the corpse of an old woman.*

INT. LIME STREET HOUSE -- PARLOR -- DAY

MARGERY sits on the divan, wrapped in a blanket, shivering. As we move in, she closes her eyes, her lips blue. Then we hear a faint, echoing whisper. Intimate, internal:

VOICE

You okay, Kid...?

MARGERY pulls the blanket around her.

MARGERY

It's so cold in here. This house is always so cold.

VOICE

It's coming...

MARGERY pulls her knees up, hides her face.

MARGERY

Now?

VOICE

Yes...

MARGERY

I don't want it!

WIDE: MARGERY's voice echoes around the darkened room. Then: the whisper:

VOICE

What do you want?

MARGERY

To escape...

VOICE

From what? Death? You of all people know there's nothing to be afraid of.

MARGERY

(looks up)

From this life... where I'm neither dead nor alive.

Then: CRANDON steps from the shadows with the salver and the glass of wine.

CRANDON

Mina... I have your medicine.

MARGERY looks at the glass of wine, struggles within herself. Then she reaches for it; CRANDON pulls back.

CRANDON

I'm concerned about you, darling. You've been under a tremendous strain.

MARGERY

But it's over now.

CRANDON

I'm afraid not. You'll have to do another sitting.

MARGERY begins shaking her head.

CRANDON

With Houdini.

MARGERY

No!

CRANDON

Mina... Houdini is indispensable to us. No matter how vulgar, no matter how... foreign he may be. You must sit with him again.

MARGERY

You said there'd be no more sittings!

CRANDON looks down at her.

CRANDON

Very well... But if you're not going to be seeing so many people, you don't need your medicine, now do you.
(starts out)

CLOSE: on MARGERY, sobbing.

MARGERY

Le Roi... please... I've trusted my life to you...

CRANDON

And I cherish it... as I do your gift. That's why we must convince Houdini.

MARGERY holds out her hand for the glass. Trembling.

MARGERY

All right...

CRANDON

(stops: turns)

And Walter will behave? There will be no more spontaneous manifestations?

MARGERY

No more...

CRANDON hands her the glass; she drains it immediately. A moment. Then she sighs, relaxes. CRANDON leans down, strokes her hair.

CRANDON

From the moment I met you, I knew you were God's instrument. You are the proof of everything I believe.

(takes her face)

Soon the whole world will know you as I do. But we must be strong for just a little longer.

CRANDON kisses her forehead, then turns toward the door. As he passes the leaded glass windows -- the glimpse of a reflection in the moonlight. A faint, liquid movement.

CRANDON stops, peers. Nothing. He looks back at MARGERY: her eyes closed, she lies back on the divan, still holding the empty glass. Serene.

CRANDON moves to the door, reaches for the knob. As he does, a shattering behind him. He turns: the wineglass lies smashed on the hearth.

MARGERY opens her eyes: the unnatural sparkle. Smiles.

MARGERY

Thank you...

Off CRANDON--

WE CUT TO:

A darkened room. HOUDINI stands at the window, leaning on a cane. His face is abraded, his fingers still bandaged.

HOUDINI

What did you find out about Crandon?

COLLINS (O.S.)
That he's a bit of a mystery.

INT. HOUDINI'S HOUSE -- STUDY -- DAY

Floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with HOUDINI's collection of rare books. Glass-fronted cabinets crammed with artifacts from the history of magic. COLLINS sits at the desk, a file of clippings and photographs before him: WALTER, MARGERY and CRANDON.

COLLINS
He comes from a wealthy family, all right.
But he's broke. Put all his money into his research.

HOUDINI
Research on what?

COLLINS
Dead bodies. That's why he left medicine.
(then)
It wasn't clear the bodies was always dead.

HOUDINI
(frowns)
He was forced to retire...

COLLINS
Right.
(then)
Now take a look at this.

COLLINS hands HOUDINI a document.

COLLINS
Autopsy on the minister. Look at the signature on the bottom.

HOUDINI stares at it, glances up.

HOUDINI
Le Roi Crandon...
(stunned)
Crandon did the autopsy on Margery's first husband?

COLLINS

Signed the death certificate, too.

HOUDINI thinks a long moment.

HOUDINI

How exactly did Walter die?

COLLINS

Actually... 'at's all a bit muddled. Story is 'e fell under a train. But wif' that and the father bein' murdered so close together, the whole thing was hushed up. No autopsy, no inquest, they just planted him.

HOUDINI

So there's no proof that Walter actually died?

COLLINS

None, 'cept a grave in a Boston churchyard.

HOUDINI

(moves from the window)

If Walter is still alive, he'd be a good candidate for our third person.

COLLINS

So it's Crandon, Frost... and Walter?

HOUDINI

It would explain a lot. How close he works with Margery. How they can do the simultaneous voice. They're an act -- like me and Bess.

(then)

What about the ectoplasm?

COLLINS

I can tell you how they make it move, change shape. Pneumatics -- some sort of an air pump. They prob'ly run it from under 'er chair.

HOUDINI

But what's Crandon making it from?

COLLINS

I've tried silk, India rubber, gum
Arabic... even sea sponge. But I can't
make it act like it's alive. It's
mystifyin'...

HOUDINI

Then maybe it's time we took a look
backstage.

WE CUT TO:

MARGERY through moiré streaks of rain on the window. Dead asleep
in her bedroom chair, cello at her feet, the bow hangs limp from
her hand. It falls, scrapes the strings.

We move down the gothic facade of the house to Lime Street. A
hearse turns the corner, splashes through the puddles past the
house. Stops. Two men get out, take a canvas body bag from the
back. As they carry it down the steps to the dispensary:

COLLINS (V.O.)

He buys 'em from the morgue... has 'em
delivered after she's asleep...

INT. CAR -- BOSTON -- NIGHT

HOUDINI and COLLINS are watching from across the street.

HOUDINI

So he's still doing his research.

COLLINS

But what the hell's he tryin' to find out?

HOUDINI

(starts out)

Wait here.

COLLINS

Do me a favor, Mr. H... be careful.

HOUDINI

(smiles)

Jim, he's one of Boston's leading citizens
and a Harvard intellectual.

COLLINS hands him a bulky Webley revolver.

COLLINS

That's why I brought this.

INT. LIME STREET HOUSE -- DISPENSARY -- NIGHT -- LATER

CRANDON leans over the corpse, starched surgical apron, sleeves rolled up. A knock at the door. Insistent. CRANDON angrily takes off his gloves, moves to the door, opens it: HOUDINI.

CRANDON

If you're here to see my wife, I'm afraid she can't be disturbed.

HOUDINI

Actually I'd like to talk to you.

CRANDON

I'm in the middle of a procedure. It's... distasteful.

HOUDINI

I have a strong stomach.

HOUDINI closes the door, moves into the dispensary. CRANDON picks up a large dissecting knife.

CRANDON

(makes an incision)

We were all very concerned about your unfortunate... experience. Are you all right?

HOUDINI

A few broken ribs...

HOUDINI moves to a barred, glass-fronted cabinet, fingers the heavy padlock.

HOUDINI

Impressive lock... Baldwin Company, Philadelphia. These must be valuable chemicals.

CRANDON

Opiates. The government has finally made them illegal to the public. I'm obliged to keep them locked.

HOUDINI

Then I suggest you buy a safe.

HOUDINI takes the lock in both hands -- instantly it falls open.

CRANDON

(scowls)

If you don't mind, I'm very busy.

CRANDON returns to the corpse.

HOUDINI

(replaces the lock)

I thought you were retired.

CRANDON

I'm doing research for a new book --
medical evidence for the existence of the
soul.

HOUDINI

Have you found any?

CRANDON

(continues cutting)

I believe I have. I've weighed dozens of
bodies just before and after death.

(looks up)

There is a consistent discrepancy of three
quarters of an ounce.

HOUDINI

So you think the soul has a physical
reality.

CRANDON

You've touched it, Mr. Houdini. The
ectoplasm.

HOUDINI

And as a scientist, what is your opinion
of the nature of ectoplasm?

CRANDON

There are certain things one doesn't
question. One accepts them as a matter of
faith.

HOUDINI watches as CRANDON opens the incision.

HOUDINI

I'm thinking of creating an ectoplasmic effect for my new show -- "A Magician Among The Spirits".

CRANDON

Yes, I've read about it.

(then)

Spiritualism is a religion, Mr. Houdini. My religion. How would you feel if someone put on a show mocking Judaism.

HOUDINI

I've seen that show, Doctor. It's called Germany.

A beat.

CRANDON

Do you think I don't know what your show is meant for? You're going to humiliate my wife and me.

HOUDINI

My show is meant as an entertainment and as warning to the public. I intend to prove that nothing a medium -- any medium -- does can't be duplicated by Houdini on stage.

CRANDON faces him holding the dissecting knife.

CRANDON

Do you know what the great disease of our time is? It's not influenza or smallpox. It's lack of faith... You weren't in the war, Mr. Houdini. You don't know what human ignorance coupled with scientific progress can do. Without faith, technology will destroy us. If it could be proved that life is stronger than death, that love survives, humanity might be changed forever. My wife's gift can do that.

HOUDINI
And that would justify just about
anything, wouldn't it.

HOUDINI moves closer to the corpse, looks down.

HOUDINI
(pointed)
Tell me, Doctor... If you were going to
make ectoplasm, how would you do it?

CRANDON stares at him. HOUDINI reaches into the cadaver, lifts
the intestines with his hands.

HOUDINI
Human tissue can remain... elastic for a
long time, can't it.

A long moment. HOUDINI replaces the viscera.

CRANDON
You're on dangerous ground, Houdini.

HOUDINI
It's where I live my life, Doctor.

WE CUT TO:

A DEATH'S HEAD, moving toward us, pointing a skeletal finger. As
it does:

VOICE (O.S.)
I'm here... believe in me.

HOUDINI stares at it, transfixed.

HOUDINI
No, Walter...

INT. HIPPODROME THEATER -- BOSTON -- STAGE -- DAY

HOUDINI approaches the DEATH'S HEAD. He peers at it a moment,
then:

HOUDINI
Let me see it again.

The DEATH'S HEAD lowers its arm, retreats. We reveal COLLINS manipulating the mechanism of an automaton. Around them, the set of a "A Magician Among The Spirits" is half-built. Except for the worklights, the theater is in darkness.

HOUDINI faces the DEATH'S HEAD again.

HOUDINI
Reveal yourself!

COLLINS moves the automaton forward:

COLLINS
I'm here, 'oudini... believe in me.

The arm comes up, the finger points--

HOUDINI
Wait, wait, wait. It has to move smoother.
Dammit, it looks like a dime-store robot.

We see a figure in the shadows at the back of the theater.
aching. Motionless.

COLLINS
Tungsten gears then. It'll cost...

HOUDINI
(snaps: tired)
I don't care, just get it done.

COLLINS removes the DEATH'S HEAD from the automaton.

COLLINS
C'mon, my darling, it's back to the works
wif' you.

As COLLINS leaves, HOUDINI begins miming the movements from the show. A stylized ballet, meticulously choreographed, accompanied by muttered cue lines.

MARGERY (O.S.: calls)
People will laugh at me.

HOUDINI stops, peers into the shadows; MARGERY steps into the light.

HOUDINI
(moves downstage)
You gotta expect that when you cheat them.

MARGERY stops at the apron.

MARGERY
Why is it easier for you to believe that
I want to cheat people, than that I have
a gift that can bring a light to the whole
world?

HOUDINI
Because I'm a magician.

HOUDINI athletically jumps down from the stage.

HOUDINI
And so are you. You're good and you have
guts. You may even have a gift. But you
made a mistake when you tried to trick me.

MARGERY
I'm so sorry for you. You want to
believe... but when you think you know how
everything is done, what is there left to
believe in?
(then)
What does the magician believe, Mr.
Houdini?

A long moment.

HOUDINI
I believe... that there is something
greater than life. Something that doesn't
die. And at moments... rare moments... we
can almost touch it.
(shakes his head)
But if you can't prove it exists, it might
as well not exist.

MARGERY
Then you believe in nothing.

HOUDINI watches as she starts away.

HOUDINI

That's not true!

His voice echoes through the theater; MARGERY stops.

HOUDINI

I've had... experiences...

MARGERY turns, looks at him closely.

HOUDINI

(softly)

In Russia once, and when I was buried alive...

MARGERY

Go on...

HOUDINI

I was doing tricks, yes... but at the bottom of it was something... something I couldn't control.

MARGERY

Does it frighten you?

HOUDINI

Yes... because I know it's real, but I can't explain it.

MARGERY

No... no one can. You have to make the leap of faith. I have, you haven't. That's the difference between us.

MARGERY moves close to him.

MARGERY

All my life, I've been surrounded by death. There were times when the grief and guilt were almost unbearable. Only the certainty that I possessed a gift from God kept me alive. I'm trying to use that gift to help others. You cannot imagine the peace that it has given me. I want everyone to know that peace.

HOUDINI

Then why the seances? Why the show?

MARGERY

It's not a show. Every religion has its icons. The statues in the cathedral, the menorah in the temple. They're symbols of something deeper... the truth we're all trying to discover.

A moment.

HOUDINI

Does your husband know you're here?

MARGERY

No... I came to you because I had to know if there was any hope that you would sit with me again. Before you do this...

MARGERY gestures to the stage, the headless automaton. A moment, then:

HOUDINI

Would you agree to certain conditions?

MARGERY

Anything... for you.

HOUDINI

I'm giving you fair warning, Mrs. Crandon. I'm gonna be tougher on you than I've ever been on anyone.

MARGERY

I'm not afraid.

HOUDINI looks into MARGERY's eyes: fragile, sincere, guileless.

HOUDINI

Then I will sit with you again. If you convince me, I'll cancel my show.

MARGERY

That's all I ask.

HOUDINI

But if not, I want your word of honor that you and your husband will attend my opening night. Do you agree?

CLOSE: on MARGERY.

MARGERY

Yes.

MARGERY takes his hands, looks into his eyes.

MARGERY

Walter was right, you do have a good heart...

BESS (O.S.)

Is this a private seance, or can anyone join?

BESS moves down the aisle; MARGERY pulls away.

HOUDINI

Mrs. Crandon has just invited me to another sitting.

BESS

You don't give up easy, do you, sweetie.

MARGERY

I'm sorry, I--

BESS

Professor Frost's waiting outside... it's raining.

MARGERY glances at HOUDINI, hurries out.

HOUDINI

I thought she was alone.

BESS

She lied... so what else is new?

(then)

You gotta give 'em points for chutzpah -- her and her boyfriend Frost. Trying to con you into another seance.

HOUDINI

I'm going.

BESS

What!?

HOUDINI

I made a deal with her.

HOUDINI walks up onto the stage; BESS follows.

BESS

Ehrie, I'm half of Houdini. I gotta have a say in this.

HOUDINI

This time the seance will be on my terms. Either she proves herself, or they've gotta come to our show.

BESS

But you've got it figured out. Walter does the second voice, and the ectoplasm is... Christ, I don't even want to think about it.

(then)

What did she say to you? What did you promise her?

HOUDINI

That if she convinces me, we cancel.

BESS

(stunned)

You'd cancel the show for her?

HOUDINI

No... for the truth.

BESS

Ehrie, the dead are buried and gone. You've got me!

HOUDINI looks at her.

HOUDINI

Yeah... and I need your help with this.

Off BESS, WE CUT TO:

Surgical tape ripping off a roll. MARGERY stares straight ahead. BESS is roughly taping her forearms to the arms of the chair in the Cabinet.

INT. LIME STREET HOUSE -- SEANCE ROOM -- NIGHT

HOUDINI stands at the center of the room. CRANDON, CONAN DOYLE, FROST and BIRD look on in disapproval.

HOUDINI

Her legs, too.

BESS

You got it.

BESS kneels, begins taping MARGERY's legs. COLLINS is examining the table, turns it upside down.

CRANDON

This is outrageous!

COLLINS

(to Houdini)

Clean as a whistle.

HOUDINI

Check the walls...

COLLINS

Right.

CRANDON

No other medium in the world has been subjected to this kind of treatment.

HOUDINI

Do you want to convince Houdini, or not?

FROST

It's sacreligious.

MARGERY

Be quiet, Daniel. Go on, Mr. Houdini.

HOUDINI looks at her a moment. Then:

HOUDINI
(to Bess)
Search her.

BESS steps in front of MARGERY, puts her hand down the front of the kimono.

CRANDON
Oh, my God--

CONAN DOYLE turns away.

BIRD
Houdini, if she produces phenomena under these conditions, will you agree to give her the prize?

HOUDINI
If the phenomena are genuine, I'll give her the whole twenty thousand myself.

BESS moves away from MARGERY.

BESS
You can start any time.

HOUDINI
Collins?

COLLINS
Done.

HOUDINI
Take your places, gentlemen. I'll join you in a moment.

As the others sit, HOUDINI, BESS and COLLINS go out into the hallway. A hasty, whispered conference:

COLLINS
There's a passage behind the walls, all right. Rest of the room is jake.

HOUDINI
Then they're ready for me.

COLLINS hands HOUDINI a small flashlight.

HOUDINI
What about Margery?

BESS
She's not really a blonde.

HOUDINI looks at her.

BESS
She's clean.

COLLINS
I dunno what they're gonna do, but I wish
I had a ticket.

WE CUT TO:

MARGERY deep in trance, CRANDON in the shadows, the men grasping hands, "Souvenir" on the Victrola. As the music ends, the curtains rustle, the candles flicker. Then: a low, disapproving
stle:

WALTER
You boys mean business... What have you
done to the Kid?

HOUDINI glances at CRANDON's silhouette in the shadows.

HOUDINI
Everyone keep their hands on the table.

CRANDON
I apologize, Walter. One of our number
insisted on it.

WALTER
Let me see if I can guess.

HOUDINI looks back at the mantle, a subtle movement.

HOUDINI
It was my idea, Walter. I wanted to see
what you could do on your own.

WALTER
You would, you arrogant sonofabitch.

MARGERY is agitated, pulling at the restraints.

HOUDINI
It's show-time, Walter.

WALTER's voice is directly behind HOUDINI.

WALTER
It's truth-time, Harry.

MARGERY's chair begins to vibrate. BIRD and FROST grasp at her arms.

HOUDINI
Nobody move!

WALTER
You can't believe in her unless you
believe in me. And to believe in me,
you've gotta face the truth about yourself.

HOUDINI
And what is the truth about myself, Walter?

WALTER
That you're the worst kind of phony. You
started out wanting to believe, and now
you want to stop everybody else from
believing.

Then: the red light is strobing. As HOUDINI watches: a thick ectoplasmic arm emerges from beneath MARGERY's robe, forms stubby fingers -- a grotesque hand. It reaches for the table. MARGERY is gasping, muscles contracting.

CONAN DOYLE
Do you see it, Harry?

FROST
(lurches toward her)
Can't you see, she's in pain!

HOUDINI yanks him back.

HOUDINI
Stay where you are, Frost!

The others watch amazed, as the ectoplasmic hand presses down on the seance table. Then: MARGERY and the chair are levitating, levered by the ectoplasmic arm.

WALTER

(snarls)

You think you're so clever. You think you know how everything is done. But you don't believe in anything!

MARGERY is moaning in agony; FROST and BIRD struggle to pull her down.

FROST

Houdini, stop this--

HOUDINI

Shut up!

CONAN DOYLE

Walter, please!

Suddenly, MARGERY is dropped back to the floor. The ectoplasmic arm quickly snakes out toward HOUDINI under the strobing light.

It stops inches from his face, forms an accusing finger.

WALTER

You're afraid, Houdini. You're just plain scared.

HOUDINI

No, I'm not, Walter. You are.

WALTER's laughter echoes around the room; the ectoplasmic arm disappears.

WALTER

Me? Afraid of what?

HOUDINI

The light. Why don't you show yourself?
Where are you, Walter?

WALTER's voice whispers in HOUDINI's ear:

WALTER

I'm right behind you, Harry. Don't turn around!

HOUDINI twists around, breaks the circle.

WHAT HE SEES: a disembodied face. Gaunt, ghostly, sepulchral, barely recognizable from the photographs. WALTER.

The others react, horrified.

HOUDINI swings his arm -- strikes out at the apparition with the flashlight. The beam slashes through the darkness. The face vanishes -- tumult in the room.

BIRD

What's this about, Houdini?

HOUDINI

Why don't you ask him?

HOUDINI trains the flashlight on CRANDON's silhouette by the mantle: *NOKUCHI's face appears in the narrow beam.*

CONAN DOYLE

Nokuchi--

HOUDINI

(turns the light)
Or Professor Frost.

FROST

Ask me what?--

HOUDINI

Why you broke the circle when Crandon went behind the Cabinet.

BIRD

What are you talking about?

HOUDINI

I'm talking about fraud. Crandon and Frost--

FROST

That's not true--

CONAN DOYLE
Where is Dr. Crandon?

HOUDINI
Behind the walls -- with Walter.

HOUDINI moves quickly to the wall -- throws the light switch.

HOUDINI
It's over! Show yourself, Walter, goddamn you!

A long moment.

Then: in the glare of the electric light, MARGERY convulses. Incredibly, she rips free of the restraints. She raises herself, slowly, painfully. Then she looks up; the men recoil.

CONAN DOYLE
Good God...

WHAT THEY SEE: MARGERY is transfigured. Grotesquely. Her eyes are black holes. Her skin seems translucent, a liquid presence swirling within. She looks directly at HOUDINI -- he is stunned, fascinated.

Then, the breathy, double VOICE comes through her:

MARGERY/VOICE
Houdini... help her. You're the only one who can help her escape.

Suddenly CRANDON appears from behind the curtains -- his face is painted in green phosphorescence. His lips and eyes blackened. He wears a black leotard. In the light the effect is pathetically theatrical. Like a bad silent film.

CRANDON
(trembling: terrified)
Stop it -- stop this!

MARGERY turns on him, growls:

MARGERY/VOICE
You opened the door, Crandon. Now you're all in danger...

She turns back to HOUDINI.

MARGERY/VOICE
Help her, Houdini, help her. But harm
her... and you'll be dead within the month.

CLOSE: on HOUDINI, transfixed.

CRANDON lurches forward, shakes MARGERY violently.

CRANDON
What are you doing!?

FROST
(jumps up)
Take your hands off her!

MARGERY is coming out of the trance.

MARGERY
Le Roi...?

CRANDON
Who are you? WHO THE HELL ARE YOU!?

CRANDON throws her into the corner, advances on her, fist
raised. HOUDINI steps in front of him, grabs his arm.

HOUDINI
You'll go through me first.

CRANDON glares at him, then he comes to himself. He glances at
the others, then down at himself. Ridiculous. Humiliated.

FROST moves to MARGERY, kneels beside her, holds her as she sobs.

CONAN DOYLE
(stands)
Le Roi... in God's name, what have you
done?

CRANDON pulls away from HOUDINI, yanks the door open.

CRANDON
(shaken)
I... I want you out of my house. All of
you!

Off HOUDINI--

INT. HOUDINI'S HOUSE -- STUDY -- NIGHT

Deep shadows. An agitated midnight conference. HOUDINI is pacing. BESS and COLLINS sit nearby.

BESS

You're not cancelling the show!

HOUDINI

Her entire body glowed--

BESS

Christ, you sound like a hick in the cheap seats--

HOUDINI

Her eyes were empty, Bess. I could see through her skin. Crandon was terrified. Genuinely terrified...

BESS

It's part of the shtick! They fed you the phony stuff to make the ending look real! Tell him, Jim!

COLLINS

It's cheeky but it's bloody brilliant. 'at's how they could go wif' a clean room. They weren't after a physical effect, they were playin' games wif' your mind.

HOUDINI

But she changed -- I saw it!

COLLINS

I've never seen the effect, but that don't make it supernatural. Face it, Mr. H., they're doin' top-of-the-bill magic in an attic on Beacon Hill.

HOUDINI

No... it wasn't magic. It was like...

BESS

Like what?

HOUDINI drops into a chair.

HOUDINI

Like... what I saw in the casket.

BESS

Oh, God no...

HOUDINI

It was the same thing.

BESS

It's not real!

HOUDINI

If it's not real, then you tell me why she's doing it.

BESS

For the money! They're broke!

HOUDINI

She's been beaten up and thrown around all of her life. If I hadn't stopped Crandon, he would have killed her.

BESS

It's what she knows. In some weird way, it's what she wants. It's sick, but she's addicted to it.

A moment.

HOUDINI

Addicted...

BESS

It's what her father did, it's what the minister did. She knows you know that. Now she's worked it into her act to make you feel sorry for her.

HOUDINI

No, no that's not it...

HOUDINI stands, moves to a bookshelf.

BESS

What then?

HOUDINI
Jim, you were wounded in the war.

COLLINS
(puzzled)
Yeah...

HOUDINI
Did they give you morphine for the pain?

COLLINS
Sure... Army doctors flogged 'at stuff
like it was marzipan.

HOUDINI
How much of a dose?

COLLINS
Gram a week, at least.

HOUDINI
What about two grams? A day.

COLLINS
Two grams a day? That's not a dosage --
it's a bloody religion!

HOUDINI
It's Crandon's religion...

HOUDINI holds up a leather-bound volume -- CRANDON's book.

HOUDINI
That's what he prescribes for women who've
had gynecological surgery. His
laboratory's full of the stuff.

BESS
(the realization)
She's a junkie. Margery's a junkie. She
doesn't go into a trance, she goes on the
nod.

HOUDINI
That's how Crandon manipulates her.

BESS

Wait a minute. She's not doped up when they rig the room. She's not doped when they rehearse. She's part of the act, Ehrie.

HOUDINI

Against her will.

BESS

Why are you trying to save this woman's soul!?

COLLINS

Wif' respect, Mrs. H., when you're in the arms of Mother Morphia, you got no soul. If you're not on it, you're waitin' to get it. And to get it, you'd kill your own mother.

BESS

Or your own husband?

They stop, look at her.

HOUDINI

No... that was Walter. Walter's alive and I'm gonna expose him.

BESS

You have no proof.

HOUDINI

But I've got the show... and I'll have them, too. The Crandons and Frost. Front row center.

BESS

Why the hell would they come to the show now?

HOUDINI

Because if they don't, they're going to prison.

WE CUT TO:

Opening night chaos. Limousine gridlock. Lines around the block. The crowd crushes toward the theater entrance. A huge billboard towers over Charles Street: "A Magician Among The Spirits -- Houdini vs. Margery!".

INT. HIPPODROME THEATER -- BOSTON -- NIGHT

CRANDON, MARGERY and FROST make their way to the front row. CRANDON is tight-lipped, stiff. MARGERY's face is barely visible beneath a wide-brimmed Chanel hat. FROST pats her hand reassuringly.

INT. HIPPODROME THEATER -- BACKSTAGE -- NIGHT

HOUDINI, impeccable in a tuxedo, hurries up to COLLINS, who stands with the CAMERAMAN as DUTCH threads film into a massive Mitchell.

HOUDINI

Are they out there?

COLLINS

The whole gang of 'em.

HOUDINI

If it jams this time, Dutch, they'll be contacting you on the other side.

Off DUTCH, WE CUT TO:

Black. Then, an unearthly green light snaps on, revealing: HOUDINI's face. Like a death mask.

HOUDINI

(a spectral voice)

Dare you lift the curtain of death and explore the world beyond? Houdini does!

INT. HIPPODROME THEATER -- NIGHT

A ghostly solo trumpet plays "Souvenir" as HOUDINI moves downstage. The lights slowly come up, revealing: an exact duplicate of the seance room. The mantle, the curtains, the table, the Cabinet.

HOUDINI
(a sweep of his arm)
Ladies and gentlemen I give you... the
Witch of Lime Street!

A flash of light, a loud pop: BESS appears in the Cabinet --
gossamer robe, ethereal aura. She takes her place; HOUDINI turns
to the packed house.

HOUDINI
I require the assistance of four believers
to complete the circle with the celebrated
medium.

As four audience members make their way onto the stage, they
pass CRANDON, MARGERY and FROST illuminated by the footlights.
Grim, uncomfortable.

BACKSTAGE: COLLINS stands behind the CAMERAMAN as DUTCH pulls
focus, sweating nervously.

ONSTAGE: the audience members join hands at the table.

HOUDINI
The seance... as ancient as the East. As
modern as today's headlines. Is it
Spiritualism, or charlatanism?
(to the Crandons)
Is it "contact" or a con game?
(then)
Watch... and learn the truth!

HOUDINI moves into the Cabinet, stands behind BESS. Then he
passes his hands over her, sprinkles a shimmering powder. She
slips into "trance".

HOUDINI
With the aid of a powerful narcotic, the
medium enters her trance. Her body no
longer her own, it is now the vehicle
for... the visitation of the dead!

Flashes of lightning, exploding thunder. HOUDINI moves into the
shadows by the mantle as the full orchestra joins the trumpet.

The seance table levitates, flies effortlessly around the stage.
It hovers above the sitters, begins glowing, pulsing.

HOUDINI
 (a silhouette in the shadows)
 I call upon the spirits of the dead...
 reveal yourselves!

From the table: dozens of fluorescent "ghosts" dart out, fly over the heads of the audience. Disappear. Gasps.

BACKSTAGE: as the camera cranks, COLLINS cues the elaborate effects. "Ghosts" on fishing poles, speaking tubes, a levitation mechanism, pneumatic pumps.

HOUDINI
 (turns to the Sitters)
 Do you feel it, gentlemen? Do you feel the presence?

CLOSE: on a bearded SITTER.

SITTER
 (breath visible)
 It's getting cold... Very cold...

Some of the audience pull their coats around themselves.

CLOSE: as FROST shifts in his seat, glances at CRANDON who stares straight ahead.

HOUDINI
 It's getting stronger... do you smell it?
 Do you see it?!

BESS is gasping, muscles contracting. Ectoplasmic arms emerge as if from her body. Sinuous, glowing.

HOUDINI
 Ectoplasm... the physical form of the departed soul. See how it moves as if it's alive...

The ectoplasmic arms snake across the table.

HOUDINI
 Well, ladies and gentlemen, it once was.
 Living tissue harvested from the dead. And brought back to life not by spirits... but by science!

The audience looks on; murmurs of disgust, horror.

BACKSTAGE: COLLINS moves to the camera, watches through binoculars. Enjoying himself.

COLLINS

Steady boys... 'ere it comes.

The walls begin trembling, windows rattling. BESS moans, writhes, then: she is levitating. As the sitters try to hold her down, the shaking becomes violent. A bookshelf topples.

HOUDINI

(over the din)

Now is the moment of truth. Do the dead come back from their graves? Or pretend for the profit of the living? Can they revisit us from their eternal rest? Or is it just a rat behind the walls?!

The chair drops. Dead silence. BESS's eyes snap open, "possessed".

BESS

Walter...

Then a whisper echoes through the theater:

"WALTER"

Believe...

A tremendous crash of thunder, flashes of lightning. The ghost of WALTER materializes centerstage. A corpse. Grotesque. Skeletal. Dripping with luminescent decay.

HOUDINI

The medium's dead brother, crushed by a train eight years ago, and resurrected by her husband and his accomplices!

"WALTER"

You lie, Houdini!

HOUDINI

The lie is you.

"WALTER"

I'm here, Houdini. You must believe in me!

HOUDINI

No, Walter. I denounce you as a fraud!

HOUDINI raises his arm in the shadows, points.

HOUDINI

I accuse you of being alive!

SITTER

Stop this, Houdini!

The bearded SITTER jumps up, breaks the circle -- the ghost disappears.

SITTER

Stop it! It's a sacrilege!

A moment. Then HOUDINI's silhouette steps into the light: the grinning DEATH'S HEAD in a tuxedo. The audience is stunned. The DEATH'S HEAD moves forward, turns slightly.

Then: the tuxedo collapses, empty on the stage.

BESS moves downstage, the orchestra plays an ominous tremolo.

BESS

(stops)

But Houdini... where is Houdini?

The bearded SITTER turns. He removes glasses, wig, whiskers, revealing: HOUDINI.

HOUDINI

Here! And you, Margery... are exposed!

As the orchestra strikes a crashing chord, BESS disappears. The crowd is on its feet. Cheering wildly.

Suddenly, MARGERY stands, staggers as if she's about to collapse. The audience catches sight of her -- jeers, booing. MARGERY stares at them a moment, frozen, her face stained with tears. Then she bolts up the aisle.

CRANDON and FROST try to follow but the crowd is swirling toward the stage.

FROST
You've ruined me, Le Roi. You've ruined us
all. You'll pay...

FROST pushes his way through the crowd; CRANDON turns toward the stage as:

HOUDINI moves to the footlights. Triumphant.

Off the thunderous applause, WE CUT TO:

Grainy black and white. The whir of a projector. Jump cuts, a crude montage. CRANDON sitting stiffly, gripping the arms of his chair. FROST squirms. MARGERY has her head down.

COLLINS (O.S.)
That was when you was levitatin', Mrs. H!

INT. HOUDINI'S HOUSE -- PRIVATE WORKSHOP -- DAY

HOUDINI, BESS, and COLLINS are watching the film on a portable screen. The turret rotates to a longer lens -- CRANDON scowls, wipes the sweat from his face with a monogrammed handkerchief.

HOUDINI
Look at Crandon! He's never seen it done
that well!

Howls of laughter.

COLLINS
'e's sweatin' like a stoker!

BESS
And everybody else was freezing!

COLLINS
Now watch Frost -- right here -- I think
he peed his pants. There -- there it goes!

BESS
(hoots)
Not a dry seat in the house!

More laughter. We catch a blurred image in the foreground as CRANDON looks on.

HOUDINI
Wait, wait -- this is where "Walter"
appears.

CRANDON goes white, stares. Numb. HOUDINI moves right to the
screen, points at him.

HOUDINI
There -- you see that? I've got you, you
blue-blooded bastard.

Then the camera pans to MARGERY as she slowly raises her head.
Tears are pouring down her face. Devastated. The image silences
everyone.

CLOSE: on HOUDINI. Moved.

HOUDINI
God, look at her...

COLLINS
(softly)
The game's up. She's caught and she knows
it.

HOUDINI
No... that's not guilt...

BESS
She's acting, Ehrie...

HOUDINI
This isn't acting. This is real.

HOUDINI touches her face on the screen.

HOUDINI
This is real...

As the film ends, the light from the projector silhouettes
HOUDINI on the screen.

BESS
(moves to him)
Even if she's doing it against her will,
she's still doing it.
(more)

BESS (cont'd)

(then)

Jim and I'll take the film to Hoagland.
When the press gets through with her,
they'll be calling her "The Bitch of Lime
Street".

HOUDINI lies on the leather sofa, sighs.

HOUDINI

Y'know, Walter warned me about doing this.
He said if I harmed her, I'd be dead
within the month.

BESS

That just proves it's all phony.
(kisses him)
Houdini's gonna live forever.

HOUDINI looks at her, then closes his eyes, exhausted.

EXT. HOUDINI'S HOUSE -- DAY -- RAIN

A POV: BESS and COLLINS hurry from the house with the cans of
film. They get into a waiting cab, drive off.

Then: the POV is moving toward the house. As it starts up the
front steps, WE CUT TO:

HOUDINI sinking through black water, struggling against massive
chains and locks. A huge iron ball drags him to the bottom, his
lungs bursting. He cannot free himself. He opens his mouth to
breathe, to scream. Silence.

INT. HOUDINI'S HOUSE -- PRIVATE WORKSHOP -- DAY

HOUDINI struggles against the nightmare -- gasping for breath in
the darkened room. He jolts awake, looks around, disoriented,
panting.

A figure is standing across the room, gazing at him. HOUDINI
stares back, unsure if he's still dreaming. Then:

MARGERY

Why did you do it?

MARGERY steps into the light. Frail, trembling, her eyes wild.

HOUDINI

How did you get in here?

MARGERY

You humiliated me, you betrayed me... And now you're going to die.

Then: she collapses. HOUDINI moves to her.

HOUDINI

Who? Who's going to kill me? Is it Walter?

MARGERY is gasping, breathless.

HOUDINI

Walter killed the minister, didn't he?

MARGERY

He was protecting my gift--

HOUDINI

He killed your father--

MARGERY

He's always protected me. I've begged him not to hurt anyone else. Not to hurt you...

MARGERY is choking, convulsing.

HOUDINI

You're ill...

MARGERY

(panting)

I haven't had my medicine...

HOUDINI

Your morphine.

HOUDINI helps her to the leather sofa, lays her down.

MARGERY

I've been walking around all night... trying to control it... I can't...

HOUDINI

I'll take you to the hospital--

MARGERY

No! That's where it started.

(then)

I'm going home, but I had to see you first. To prove my gift...

HOUDINI

It's too late for that.

MARGERY pulls herself together.

MARGERY

Please... five minutes, just five minutes. Of all people, you have to know the truth. Control me.

(then: a whisper)

Control me...

A long moment. HOUDINI sits, puts the silver pocket watch between them. Then: he takes her hands.

MARGERY

(looks into his eyes)

When you told me about Russia... and the grave... I knew. You crossed over... as I do...

MARGERY closes her eyes, slipping into trance. As she does, the pain, the panting, subside. Her face becomes tranquil, suffused with peace.

HOUDINI watches her in disbelief, struggling to be dispassionate. But as we move in on him, we begin to hear the other-worldly, hum. Caressing. Soothing.

HOUDINI glances down at the pocket watch: the second hand sweeps toward 12.

Then: he is inside the casket, huddled against the frosted wall.

Underground. The terrified eye, staring. Becoming calmer as it focuses on a point of light.

The images overlap, slipping back and forth from casket to grave to seance. The hum grows louder and louder as the white light expands, billows.

Then: dream-like fragments: HOUDINI's fingers claw at the wall of the carette. His hand gropes through the sand toward the surface.

HOUDINI's hands are clutching MARGERY's. He looks down at the pocket watch.

CLOSE: the second hand reaches 12, and stops.

HOUDINI stares at it. An EXTREME CLOSE-UP: as the second hand ticks backwards.

The hypnotic hum reaches a crescendo, and as it does: HOUDINI's fingers seem to meld into the metal of the carette. His fingertips break through the surface of the sand.

Then we hear a familiar voice, maternal, reassuring:

VOICE

Wo bist du, mein kind?

The white light is blinding now. In it we barely discern HOUDINI's hand rising through the sand toward the sky; emerging through the lead wall. Then he is reaching for a face:

VOICE

Es iz in ordnung... Ich bin du...

HOUDINI looks up, finds himself touching MARGERY's face. Her eyes are closed, her lips moving:

MARGERY/VOICE

De bist nisht alayn...Es iz in ordnung...

There are tears in HOUDINI's eyes as the light and sound slowly fade.

MARGERY comes out of the trance.

MARGERY

Examine me...

HOUDINI

No, Margery...

MARGERY

I wish you'd call me Mina...

MARGERY lies back, opens her dress.

MARGERY
I want you to know that I am not
concealing anything from you.

She takes his hand, begins touching it to her body.

MARGERY
You see there is nothing here... nothing
but flesh...

They look at each other a long moment. MARGERY puts her arms
around the back of his neck.

HOUDINI
Who are you? What are you?

MARGERY
I'm just a medium. You let yourself
believe... and you found peace. That is my
gift...

HOUDINI leans down, their lips almost touching.

MARGERY
Our gift...

As they kiss, WE CUT TO:

BESS, grim, stone-faced.

BESS
She was here...

INT. HOUDINI'S HOUSE -- PARLOR -- DAY -- LATER

A shaft of harsh autumn light splits the room. BESS stands in
silhouette by the window; HOUDINI is in the shadows, fingering
his father's watch.

HOUDINI
It was a private sitting.

BESS
In my house...

HOUDINI

Bess, she showed me something this time.

BESS

I'll bet she damn well did--

HOUDINI

This watch, my father's watch. She made it run backwards. *She brought my mother back--*

BESS

Nobody can bring back the dead!

BESS moves to him.

BESS

Ehrie, I gave up everything for you. My family, even my religion. To create Houdini. Together. I'm not gonna watch you throw it away because of your obsession with this slut.

HOUDINI

She's a true medium, Bess--

BESS

She's not a medium, she's a murderer!

HOUDINI

No--

BESS

She killed the minister, she killed her father--

HOUDINI

(explodes)

Walter did!

BESS

Walter is dead. You want to believe he's alive to save her. Because if he's dead, she's a monster. And that is what's real, Ehrie.

A moment.

HOUDINI

Maybe I can't prove that Walter's alive.
But I can damn well prove he's not dead.

Off BESS, WE CUT TO:

An open grave. COLLINS stands nervously over three laborers as they shovel dirt from the hole.

COLLINS

(hisses)

No noise -- no noise!

EXT. CEMETERY -- NIGHT

Ancient tombstones, broken crosses shrouded in mist from recent rain. A waning moon. HOUDINI paces, BESS stands nearby.

BESS

This is crazy... this is beyond crazy.

HOUDINI

(to Collins)

Hurry it up.

A shovel clangs on brass.

COLLINS

We've got it, Mr. H.

The laborers scoop the dirt from around the coffin lid.

BESS

What the hell is this gonna prove, Ehrie?

HOUDINI

Everything. That coffin is empty. And it is possible to contact the dead.

COLLINS

(to the laborers)

Get out of it -- go on.

As the laborers climb out:

BESS

You see what she's brought you to... This is wrong, Ehrie.

HOUDINI
(points to the coffin)
The truth is there.

COLLINS
(looks up)
Mr. H. -- it's startin' to rain again.

HOUDINI moves to the edge of the grave. BESS stops him.

BESS
God built the barrier between life and
death, Ehrie. No human can break it -- not
even Houdini.

HOUDINI looks at her a long moment. Then he takes a lantern from
COLLINS, jumps into the open grave. A moment. He reaches down,
grips the lid. Opens it.

CLOSE: a hideously decayed corpse in a rotted suit.

HOUDINI stares at it, incredulous.

COLLINS
(breathes)
Good Jesus Christ... Walter.

HOUDINI looks up at BESS.

BESS
(disgusted)
Maybe you did see a ghost.

BESS turns, walks away. HOUDINI looks back at the open coffin.

EXT./INT. LIME STREET HOUSE -- NIGHT -- RAIN

The house is shuttered, silent. The gate is padlocked, the front
door is sealed with heavy bolts.

Then: we are gliding down the balustrade through thick shadows
toward the double parlor doors. Locked.

INT. LIME STREET HOUSE -- PARLOR -- NIGHT

FROM ABOVE: CRANDON sits in the middle of the room, staring at
the doors. The only sound is the rain against the leaded glass.

The room is in disarray -- clothing, food, empty liquor bottles -- CRANDON's been living in it for days.

We move down to his face: gaunt, drawn. Then: the doorknob moves. CRANDON raises a revolver, shaking.

CLOSE: as the doorknob moves again. A scratching; sharp, insistent.

CLOSE: CRANDON cocks the revolver.

The door opens, a figure steps into the room. Then into the light: HOUDINI.

CRANDON

You...

HOUDINI

Where are the servants?

CRANDON

Gone... How dare you break in here?

HOUDINI

Why didn't you answer the door?

CRANDON

Because I'm afraid, Mr. Houdini.

HOUDINI

(ironic)

Of course, you're afraid... You live in a haunted house.

CRANDON

(growls)

Yes. But I thought I was the one who was haunting it!

(puts the gun down)

HOUDINI

Where is your wife?

CRANDON

Stay out of this, Houdini, you don't know what you're dealing with.

CRANDON pours expensive liquor into a dirty glass.

HOUDINI

Walter's dead -- I've come from his grave.

CRANDON

(drinks)

Of course he's dead. No one ever doubted that but you. And you only thought he was alive because that's what she wanted you to think.

CRANDON pours himself another drink.

CRANDON

She and Frost, they're conspiring together against me. Frost has already threatened me. I expect him here tonight.

HOUDINI

Don't be a fool, Crandon. Frost didn't do the double voice--

CRANDON

And neither did I! Yet you heard it. You saw what happened. I saw it...

CRANDON downs the drink, trembling. He looks at HOUDINI.

CRANDON

Just tell me one thing, Houdini. Tell me one thing... *How is she doing it?*

A noise from upstairs, a heavy scraping. HOUDINI glances up; CRANDON ignores it.

CRANDON

Because if she's not doing it, then I've let an evil loose in this world.

Another noise. Louder.

HOUDINI

What's that?

CRANDON

The sounds of a haunted house...

HOUDINI

I want the truth, goddamnit, and I want it from you!

CRANDON

The truth...

A moment.

CRANDON

You know that Walter is dead. What you don't know is that he died *before* the father. Yes, Houdini... *before*.

CLOSE: on HOUDINI.

CRANDON

Face the truth that I've had to face. She killed her first husband. She killed her father. *She killed Walter.*

(then)

And now she wants to kill me...

HOUDINI

Tell me where she is.

CRANDON

Where she can't hurt anyone.

HOUDINI

You'll tell me or you'll tell the police.

CRANDON

(a little laugh)

The police...

HOUDINI

I can put you in jail.

CRANDON looks at him, deadly serious.

CRANDON

I'm not afraid of going to jail, Mr. Houdini. I'm afraid of going to hell.

A hideous scream from upstairs -- primal, frightening. HOUDINI sprints for the stairs.

INT. LIME STREET HOUSE -- SEANCE ROOM CORRIDOR -- PRE-DAWN

HOUDINI hurries toward the door. Chaos in the seance room. Shrieking. Furniture being overturned. Glass shattering. HOUDINI tries the door. Locked. He kneels, begins working on the lock. CRANDON's footsteps on the stairs.

CRANDON (O.S.)

Houdini--

HOUDINI picks the lock, stands.

CRANDON

Don't open that door!

HOUDINI turns: CRANDON points the revolver at him.

A moment. Then: HOUDINI throws the door open.

WHAT HE SEES: The room has been torn apart. Speaking tubes hang from the walls like the arms of corpses. The Cabinet is destroyed. The chair is "levitated" at a crazy angle. The seance table hangs from the ceiling. The walls glow with smeared coplasm.

HOUDINI reels from the smell -- the decay. Then a movement in the shadows of a corner. HOUDINI peers into the darkness:

MARGERY. Tiny. Cowering. An animal. Her face is streaked with phosphorescence. Her fingernails drip blood -- she's torn the place apart with her bare hands. Trying to escape.

HOUDINI

Mina...?

HOUDINI starts toward her.

MARGERY looks up at him, glassy-eyed, then slowly focusing.

MARGERY

You... were supposed... to help me...
escape.

CRANDON is in the doorway.

HOUDINI

(staring at Margery)
What have you done to her?

CRANDON
I've stopped it...

HOUDINI looks at him.

CRANDON
The morphine...

MARGERY lets out a howl -- throws herself at him.

MARGERY
You've murdered me! You've murdered me!

CRANDON grabs her, begins choking her.

CRANDON
You bitch! You unholy bitch!

HOUDINI pulls CRANDON off her. Then he hits CRANDON square in the face, drives him across the room. He turns, steps into the corridor:

MARGERY is gone.

HOUDINI
(shouts)
Mina!

The shout echoes through the house. Then: an explosion of sound behind him. He turns: the iron handle of the skylight swings against the wall.

WE CUT TO:

MARGERY, eyes closed, poised on the highest gable of the house, sixty feet above the street. She spreads her arms as if in crucifixion.

EXT. LIME STREET HOUSE -- ROOF -- PRE-DAWN -- RAIN

HOUDINI pulls himself up through the skylight, struggles for balance on the sloping slate roof.

MARGERY opens her eyes. Her shredded nightgown is ruffled by the wind, her face still glows from the ectoplasm. Sticky strands of it in her hair.

HOUDINI moves toward her.

MARGERY steps to the edge, starts to let herself go.

HOUDINI

Mina--

MARGERY stops. HOUDINI makes his way across the gothic angles of the roof, slips. The rain is heavier now.

MARGERY

(looks down at him)

Don't hate me.

HOUDINI has nearly reached her.

HOUDINI

No, Mina... no...

MARGERY looks down at herself, tears form in her eyes.

MARGERY

I'm so ashamed.

HOUDINI

(inching closer)

I want to help you...

MARGERY

How...? You don't believe.

HOUDINI

I do... If anyone can lift the curtain...
it's you.

HOUDINI reaches for her, takes her in his arms, pulls her from the edge, down to the roof ridge. MARGERY looks up at him, smiles through her tears.

MARGERY

You believe my gift is real?

HOUDINI

I believe in you...

Then she looks past HOUDINI toward the skylight.

MARGERY

No...

HOUDINI sees the terror in her eyes, turns: a silhouette in the skylight, obscured by the mist and rain. It advances on them:

CRANDON, his face smeared with blood, clutching the revolver.

CRANDON

Get away from her, Houdini--

HOUDINI

It's finished, Crandon--

CRANDON

Not until she dies!

(raises the gun)

Can't you see she's the whore of Revelations. "Arrayed in scarlet, and filthy with her fornication.... the harlot who makes the dead speak!"

HOUDINI lunges for the gun -- CRANDON strikes out at him. HOUDINI loses his balance, slides down the rain-slick roof.

MARGERY screams.

An awful moment as HOUDINI grapples for a hand-hold. Then with tremendous effort, he grabs a drainpipe, stops his fall.

CRANDON moves toward MARGERY. She looks at him, oddly composed. Almost relieved.

CRANDON

You know this must be.

MARGERY

Yes...

CRANDON holds the gun inches from her face. Then: a sudden gust of wind whips the mist above the gable. CRANDON peers at it, uncomprehending. Then: blind terror as the mist swirls, takes shape. It turns black as it moves on him.

HOUDINI is clawing his way up the roof.

HOUDINI

Crandon--

CRANDON is recoiling, backing across the roof.

MARGERY

Walter, no!

CRANDON begins firing at the mist. Once. Twice. Three times.

HOUDINI reaches the ridge, just as:

CRANDON is violently driven backwards -- crashes through the skylight. He hurtles through the stairwell, screaming. A sickening thud as he strikes the tiles of the vestibule. He stares up, still alive. Then, his eyes freeze in horror.

A jagged shard of glass drives downward like a guillotine -- nearly cuts his head off.

ON THE ROOF: MARGERY lurches forward, slips. HOUDINI grabs her arm. For a moment she swings over the edge. He pulls her to him. She's wailing, hysterical.

BELOW: CRANDON's broken body four stories below at the base of the staircase. As we move down, rain falls through the skylight. He reach his face. Grotesque. A double image, reflected in the bloody shard of glass.

ON THE ROOF: HOUDINI holds MARGERY as the black mist shreds around them. Melts into the morning light.

Then: FLASH CUTS: black and white "newsphoto" stills: CRANDON, the house, the ruined Cabinet, the speaking tubes. The hoax.

A flashbulb explodes, takes us to:

MARGERY being helped by policemen into an ambulance. More flashbulbs, shouted questions from reporters. She stares absently, oblivious.

EXT. LIME STREET HOUSE -- DAWN

HOUDINI stands on the steps, watching. HOAGLAND hurries up to him, excited.

HOAGLAND

You gotta gimme the inside on this, Harry.
You were up there. Who pushed Crandon off
the roof?

HOUDINI just stares at him.

HOAGLAND

Was it Frost? You know he's dropped outta sight. C'mon, Harry, it was Frost, wasn't it? It musta been.

BESS pulls up with COLLINS.

HOUDINI

Yeah... musta been...

HOUDINI pushes past him, puts his arm around BESS, holds her. She helps him into the car.

INT. PRINCESS THEATER -- MONTREAL -- DRESSING ROOM -- DAY

HOUDINI sits on the sofa in a robe, reading the newspaper. BESS is at the make-up table, removing a cold-cream mask.

Title: "Montreal, Three Weeks Later"

HOUDINI

(looks up)

Margery's disappeared...

BESS

What?

HOUDINI

Checked herself out of the hospital a couple nights ago. They can't find her.

BESS

So she got away with it again... she got away with murder. Her and Frost. They set Crandon up.

HOUDINI

That's what Crandon thought...

HOUDINI looks back at the paper. We notice the headlines: "Hoax Exposed -- Houdini Plays Hero!"

HOUDINI

They ask Conan Doyle here what this does to Spiritualism.

BESS

Yeah... what's he say?

HOUDINI

(reads)

"Spiritualism will outlive Houdini. He searches for frauds; we search for the truth".

(looks at Bess)

He still believes in her.

BESS

Do you?

A moment.

HOUDINI

I believe in what we do. What Houdini does. We show people the wonder. We inspire them to ask the questions.

(puts the paper down)

Houdini don't claim to have the answers.

BESS smiles. Then she comes to him, puts her arms around him.

BESS

When this tour is over let's go away together. Just you and me. No agents, no managers, no mediums.

HOUDINI

(smiles)

No magic?

BESS

(kisses him)

Wherever we go, baby, we make the magic.

Suddenly, we hear the orchestra tuning as the dressing room door opens: COLLINS.

COLLINS

The college boys is here, Mr. H.

HOUDINI

Time?

COLLINS

Ten minutes to curtain.

HOUDINI
All right, Jim, let 'em in.

As COLLINS leaves, three STUDENTS pile into the room. BESS moves back to the mirror.

HOUDINI
Enjoy the show, fellas?

STUDENT 1
It was swell, Mr. Houdini.

HOUDINI takes their programs, begins signing autographs.

HOUDINI
Where do you boys go to school?

STUDENT 2
McGill...

STUDENT 3
The Harvard of southwest Montreal.

HOUDINI smiles. Then:

VOICE (O.S.)
How 'bout the challenge, Mr. Houdini --
one punch in the feedbag?

HOUDINI
Been awhile... but, sure.

As HOUDINI hands back the programs, he stands.

HOUDINI
Five thousand bucks if--

The moment HOUDINI is on his feet a burly YOUNG MAN steps close to him. Three quick, powerful blows to the pit of HOUDINI's stomach.

HOUDINI is driven backwards onto the sofa, struggles for breath. BESS runs to him.

HOUDINI
(winces)
I - wasn't - ready...

BESS
(looks up)
Which one of you did that!?

The three STUDENTS look at each other.

STUDENT 1
It wasn't us--

BESS
Who was that other kid?

STUDENT 2
He didn't come in with us.

HOUDINI is doubled over in pain.

BESS
Jim! Jim, grab that kid!
(then)
Ehrie, are you all right?

COLLINS appears at the door.

COLLINS
I didn't see nobody come out.
(then: shocked)
Oh, Christ, Mr. H...

CLOSE: on HOUDINI, the blood drained from his face. Losing consciousness.

BESS
Ehrie... Ehrie...?

WE CUT TO:

BESS, shell-shocked.

DOCTOR
(softly)
It's peritonitis... his appendix has ruptured...

BESS
You can operate...

INT. HOSPITAL -- CORRIDOR -- NIGHT

The DOCTOR sits next to BESS, grim.

DOCTOR

It's too late...

BESS

What the hell do you mean it's too late?

A moment.

DOCTOR

He's dying, Bess.

BESS looks up at him. Disbelief, anger, tears.

BESS

Dying... what are you talking about?
Houdini can't die... Houdini never dies...

WE CUT TO:

COLLINS with two RCMP officers in the corridor of a shabby rooming house. One of them is beating on the door. Nothing.

COLLINS

This is where the bastard's supposed to live.

INT. ROOMING HOUSE -- DAY

The officers look at each other a moment.

COLLINS

You gonna bust it in, or will I?

Then one of the officers breaks the door down. They move inside.

WHAT THEY SEE: the room is threadbare but cluttered with magazines, newspapers: HOUDINI vs. MARGERY. In the corner a Victrola is ticking.

And in the shadows: a body hangs from the ceiling. COLLINS stares at it, disbelieving.

COLLINS

Jesus... it's Frost...

CLOSE: on FROST. Neck broken. Blue. Eyes staring.

Then COLLINS is aware of the ticking of the Victrola. He moves to it, lifts the needle, picks up the record. Looks at the label.

CLOSE: "Souvenir".

Off COLLINS--

INT. HOSPITAL -- ROOM -- NIGHT

BESS sits on the bed next to HOUDINI in the darkened room.

HOUDINI

(a weak rasp)

This thing's gonna get me, Bess...

BESS

No, Ehrie...

A long silence.

HOUDINI

Sweetheart... if it's possible to come back... I will... for you.

(then)

You're the only one I ever loved.

BESS

(fighting tears)

You're gonna beat this, Ehrie...

HOUDINI

You gotta promise me. You'll try... to contact me... find somebody to bring me through...

BESS

They'd just lie, Ehrie.

HOUDINI

I'll give you a signal... so you'll know it's me.

(struggles)

Remember when we met... you and your sister did a song. You closed every show with it...

BESS

(nods)

"Rosabelle"...

HOUDINI

That's what I'll call you. Rosabelle. And you'll know it's me...

BESS is crying now. She takes HOUDINI's hands, kisses them.

We hold on the tableau a long moment. Then:

WE CUT TO:

A pirate, a hobo, an angel, a ghost. Children in Hallowe'en costumes.

Title: "One Year Later"

EXT. HOUDINI'S HOUSE -- NIGHT

The street is full of trick-or-treaters. Jack o' lanterns in the windows.

INT. HOUDINI'S HOUSE -- NIGHT

The doorbell is ringing. BESS moves into the vestibule carrying a tray of taffy apples and sweets. She is dressed in black. She opens the door, forces a smile:

BESS

Well... what do we have--

She stops: a woman stands before her, her face beneath a veil.

BESS

Yes...?

No answer.

BESS

What can I do for you?

The woman removes the veil: MARGERY.

MARGERY

I'd like to speak to you, Mrs. Houdini.

A beat.

BESS

You've got a helluva nerve coming here.

MARGERY

I wanted to return this...

MARGERY holds up the silver pocket watch. BESS looks at her, stunned.

INT. HOUDINI'S HOUSE -- PARLOR -- NIGHT -- MOMENTS LATER

BESS moves to the desk, opens the drawer.

CLOSE: the Webley revolver. BESS lays the watch next to it.

BESS

I've been looking for it for a year.

(turns to her)

How did you get it?

MARGERY

He must have dropped it that last night.

I wanted to bring it many times before--

BESS

Well, you've brought it. You can leave now.

MARGERY turns to go, then stops.

MARGERY

When you're born with a gift, it's your whole life. You fight for it, you sacrifice, you do anything you have to. I want you to know I was protecting the most important thing in my life.

BESS

So was I.

A moment.

MARGERY

I know what you must think of me. There's nothing I can say to change that. I didn't come only to bring you the watch. There's something else...

MARGERY reaches into her purse. BESS reaches for the gun.
MARGERY stops, looks at her.

MARGERY
I know you tried to contact him. I read
about it in the paper.

MARGERY takes out a news clipping, then:

MARGERY
So you do believe it's possible...

BESS
I made a promise to the man I loved... the
man I love.

MARGERY
And love is stronger than death.

BESS
Is it...?

A long moment. Then MARGERY smiles, closes her eyes.

MARGERY
Oh, yes...

BESS watches in silence, wonder. As MARGERY goes into trance. A
peacefulness settles over the room, then:

MARGERY
He wants you to be at peace.

BESS stares at her.

BESS
Don't you even try it--

MARGERY
He's here...

BESS
No...

MARGERY
He's with you...

BESS is struggling within herself.

BESS
I don't believe you.

MARGERY opens her eyes; the unnatural sparkle is in them. Then a voice comes through her, kindly, familiar.

MARGERY/VOICE
Rosabelle...

BESS looks at her, tears in her eyes.

BESS
What... what did you say?

Again, the double voice:

MARGERY/VOICE
You're the only one I ever loved...

Then:

MARGERY/HOUDINI
Rosabelle... believe...

We hold on BESS's face for a long time.

FADE TO WHITE.