

Rev. 4-24-98 (Blue)

Rev. 5-04-98 (Pink)

"HOUDINI - BELIEVE"

By
Pen Densham

**PLEASE NOTE: THE NAME WALTER GIBSON HAS BEEN
CHANGED TO: JIM COLLINS**

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**"I am an American Legend.
I choose what people remember me for.
I will write my own history.
The truth be damned...
My life will be greater than the truth!"**

Harry Houdini

A six inch key grinds in a time-worn metal lock.

Note pads flip. Pencils scratch. All else is silence, like an execution. Stern mustache-faced police lead a man into a dank grim cell. Fingers riffle his shirt. They strip his chest bare.

Small scars and scrapes blemish his skin, front and back.

Super: JANUARY 6, 1906 - WASHINGTON D.C.

Outside, reporters make notes. A hand quickly writes:

"...now in the cell that held the
assassinator of President Garfield..."

A physician inspects the captive's trim body. Checks his nostrils. Runs fingers through his hair. Under his arms.

Outside, a young woman watches... nervous. Petite, pretty, she tries to look dispassionate.

Taciturn inmates in other cells strain to see her.

The Warden nods... The captive's fly is unbuttoned. As his pants descend the captive gives the woman a warm smile.

The physician searches... pubic hair. Cheeks parted. Again nothing... The cops pause, uncertain.

MAN

I won't bite.

They pin the man's arms behind him. Almost genteel.

MAN

I won't break either!

Handcuffs snap around his bony wrists... one pair. Click! Then five more pairs... up his arms... then leg manacles.

MAN

Tighter!

A reporter chuckles.

Challenged, the Cops loop chains around the man's hand and legs. Bending him in a crippling stoop. He winces pain.

The young woman enters the cell. Kneels in front of the victim. They stare, as she moves her lips close to his...

A HAND INTERVENES

(CONTINUED)

1 CONTINUED:

A thick sticky plaster seals the victim's mouth.
Surprised, the woman grasps a guard for balance.
The Warden gestures, suspicious. The Men take her out, exit.
The cell door clangs. The key CLICKS like fate.
The Warden snaps his pocket watch... seconds run.

WARDEN
(dark chuckle)
'Til tomorrow, Mr. Houdini. Maybe your
good wife and I will have dinner?

Houdini catches the young woman's eyes, a moment of doubt.
The Warden shuts the main cell-block door.

2 INT: WARDEN'S ANTE ROOM - DAY 2

BESS HOUDINI paces fretfully, eyes a wall clock. Reporters
smoke idly. Covertly she slips a lock pick from her mouth.
Unaware, the Warden smugly counts sugar lumps into a tea-cup.

3 INT: JAIL CELL BLOCK - DAY 3

The inmates hear a strange rhythmic chinking.

INSIDE THE CONDEMNED CELL:

Houdini rolls on the floor. Like a chained dervish.
His shackled hands grasp the bars. Uses them for leverage.
The strain cuts blood from his wrists. Sweat spatters. Mouth
sealed, mucus spumes from his nose as he breathes. He falls!!
Above, a spider slowly rolls a struggling insect in its web.
Face scraping the floor, Houdini forces his manacled hands
down to his naked thigh. He pressures the flesh. Blood and
skin erupt as a small metal pick protrudes. Anguish!

4 INT: WARDEN'S ANTE ROOM - DAY 4

Bess stares out the window, eyes red with stress and fear.

5 INT: JAIL CELL BLOCK - DAY 5

An OLD PRISONER looks up to see a disheveled stark-naked man
standing at his cell door.

(CONTINUED)

5 CONTINUED:

OLD PRISONER
Jesus. Where's your clothes?

HOUDINI
I pawned them.

6 INT: WARDEN'S ANTE ROOM - DAY 6

The phone rings. A male assistant picks up the ear-piece.

WARDEN'S ASSISTANT
Sir...?

7 INT: JAIL CELL BLOCK - DAY 7

The Warden charges in. All the cell doors are open!

The prisoners are out, lined up smiling. A voice turns the shocked official. Behind him, sweating, but fully clothed, Houdini gestures to the ragged prisoners.

HOUDINI
Now we're all free for dinner.

REPORTER
How'd ya do it, Harry?

Houdini embraces his relieved wife.

HOUDINI
Gentlemen, here's the only thing in this world I don't want to escape from.

THEATER CURTAINS SWEEP APART:

8 INT: VAST THEATER - NIGHT 8

A vast theater proscenium. Vapors drift to its eerie depths. Grotesque stone gargoyles tower above the mist, staring. A drum beats hypnotically... a voice echoes like a mantra.

HOUDINI
(voice over)
I breathe fire. I read minds. I can appear, or vanish at will.

A figure materializes from the swirling haze...

Houdini. Arrogant, amazing.

HOUDINI
I walk through walls, I can beat death with both hands tied behind my back.
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

8 CONTINUED:

HOUDINI (cont'd)

I can make the largest creature on this Earth vanish or touch your heart with just my breath, so that your lives will never be the same.

He blows across his palms, doves fly up like freed spirits.

HOUDINI

Harry Houdini's my name. Given to me in Appleton, Wisconsin, the fair city of my birth. I am the Supreme Ruler of Magic, the Man Who Could Not Be Caged... The Wizard of Death!

He seems to float wraithlike in smoke. He whispers.

HOUDINI

But beware... almost every word I utter is a lie! I'm also Ehrich Weiss, first-born to a poor Rabbi's wife in Budapest.

Houdini paces, his eyes electric with power and turmoil.

HOUDINI

A man who took his name from Robert-Houdin, a two-bit French magician, and with native cunning, sculpted himself into a being who eclipses every other performer of miracles living or dead. Kings, Queens, Kaisers and Czars plead for my audience. I spit in Lucifer's eye seven days a week, twice a day on matinees. And as for God... I'm prepared to meet him...

A wicked smile, as Fire shoots from his outstretched palms.

HOUDINI

But is he prepared to meet me?

9 EXT: MOVING AUTOMOBILE - NIGHT

9

Bess, lost in thought, blurred by a rain soaked windshield.

Super: HOLLYWOOD - OCTOBER 31, 1936

She's now gray, fragile, but with a nobility of spirit that defies her years. Her fingertips unconsciously touch her ring.

10 EXT: HOLLYWOOD STREET - NIGHT

10

An umbrella pushes into the thrashing rain as an older Black USHER hurries to escort Bess away from the thirties limo.

(CONTINUED)

USHER

California?... I can't remember the last
Halloween we had rain like this.

11 INT: WESTINGHOUSE RADIO THEATER - BACKSTAGE CORRIDOR - NIGHT11

The Studio Usher gently guides Bess around the labyrinth of
back stage corridors. The old theater's a vaudeville dowager.
Primped and patched for a shotgun wedding to 1930's radio.

USHER

I was a stage-boy here. I saw you and Mr.
Houdini. They chained him, wrapped him in
wet sheets. Hung him from a rope upside
down out there for two hours. Lord! Them
sheets was running red before he threw
'em down. Gave me bad dreams for weeks.

BESS

You shouldn't believe everything you see
where a magician's concerned.

As they approach, a tall graying man stubs a cigarette and
smiles gently. It's Houdini's younger brother, THEO.

THEO

Hello, Bess.

BESS

I'm glad you're here, Theo.

They embrace.

THEO

You know me. Old reliable.

BESS

(eyeing the building)
It's odd how life cycles around.

Emotions flood Bess. Theo softly hands her his handkerchief.

THEO

There's still some rain on your cheeks.

12 INT: WESTINGHOUSE RADIO THEATER - NIGHT

12

Candles flicker. A large wall clock ticks onto midnight. A
red light flashes. Radio theme music plays.

The darkened house seats are covered in dust cloths. On the
old converted stage, like dark hulks, are props and posters
from Harry's career.

(CONTINUED)

At the center of the stage, lit for a seance, sits a draped circular table. Surrounded by it's shadowy guests. A manicured host, RAY BLACKBURN, speaks to a giant metal spider of a microphone.

BLACKBURN

Ten years ago to this eve, the greatest magician who ever lived, swore on his death bed to his beloved wife, that if any man could escape from the great beyond, he, Harry Houdini, would be that man.

Bess sits at the table, lost in her thoughts. Beside her the medium, ESTHER, a tall dark woman, sits eyes closed.

BLACKBURN (cont'd)

Bess Houdini has a standing ten thousand dollar reward for any person who proves they can communicate with her husband. She's held vigil at nine other seances. Tonight, she has elected to make her tenth and final attempt from this stage in Hollywood, where she and her husband once performed. It is our fervent hope, that out there, through the power of radio, Harry Houdini will hear or feel us.

(his eyes sweep to Bess)

And that he will defy the laws of the universe and perform his ultimate escape.

13 EXT: NEW YORK STREET - DAY

13

A dancing monkey screeches.

With fear filled eyes, two panicked boys scramble past street vendors, dodging the hub-bub of the immigrant tenements.

Super: NEW YORK - 1887

14 INT: WEISS APARTMENT - STAIRWELL - DAY

14

Young Houdini (13) pulls his brother up the wooden flights.

15 INT: WEISS APARTMENT - DAY

15

The boys push through a crowd of threadbare neighbors. Their home is spartan, wood furniture, a bucket of water boiling, forgotten on the stove.

MOTHER

(Yiddish subtitles)

Ehrich, Theo, come quick.

Their mother, a stern faced woman, scoops hold of young Theo. Strained, she addresses Houdini in Yiddish.

(CONTINUED)

15 INT: WEISS APARTMENT - DAY

15

The boys push through a crowd of threadbare neighbors. Their home is spartan, wood furniture, a bucket of water boiling, forgotten on the stove. She speaks only in Yiddish.

MOTHER

(in Yiddish)

Ehrich, Theo, come quick.

Their mother, a stern-faced woman, scoops hold of young Theo.

MOTHER

(in Yiddish)

He wants you with him.

16 INT: WEISS APARTMENT - BEDROOM - DUSK

16

A pendulum sways. An old grandfather clock ticks, counterpointing the rise and fall of rasping, fluttering breaths.

Tight jawed, the fearful boy hesitates, moves to the bed.

YOUNG HOUDINI

Father...?

He stares at his father's sunken features. Each breath is a battle for life.

YOUNG HOUDINI

Are you alright?

His father's shaking hand reaches out.

SAMUEL WEISS

Closer... nearly a man... Ehrich... Mama has no English... Theo's so young...

YOUNG HOUDINI

No. Tell God to make you better!

SAMUEL WEISS

I... Sometimes his choices are... mysterious, even to those who serve him...

YOUNG HOUDINI

No...

His father falteringly reaches, touches the boy's face.

SAMUEL WEISS

I'm afraid too, Ehrich... Your mother and I have talked.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

16 CONTINUED:

16

SAMUEL WEISS (cont'd)

You **never** cried as a baby. I **never**
knew a child as you. You must be the
strength of this house... Promise me...
on the Torah...

His hand... falls. Young Houdini stands frozen.

His mother has been watching from the door. She walks to the
grandfather clock and stops its beating.

Houdini looks to his mother for comfort. She looks afraid.

MOTHER

(in Yiddish)

God gave you strength.

YOUNG HOUDINI

And what did Father get, being
faithful to God all his life?

She stares at her boy, she has no answer.

MOTHER

(in Yiddish)

You're my little man now, Ehrich.

Theo is at the door. She sweeps her younger son away, leaves
Young Houdini standing rigid, abandoned.

He lifts the Torah to his forehead. His eyes fix as he mouths
a desperate prayer... a spell!

He pushes so hard the scroll marks his skin.

YOUNG HOUDINI

I can't be the man of the house.

Hear me! Hear me... please.

Desperate, he turns to his father's corpse... he lifts the
dead man's wrist... testing for signs of life.

His father is motionless. Tears and rage burn in the boy's eyes.

Violently, he swings the clock pendulum. CLANK, CLANK, CLANK.

DISSOLVE TO:

17 INT: SWEATSHOP - DAY

17

Scissors slice into thick cloth. We move to the weary eyes of
the young boy Houdini, working. He glances up.

18 EXT: P.O.V. NEW YORK STREET - THROUGH WINDOW - DAY

18

Outside, laughing children play street games.

(CONTINUED)

DISSOLVE TO:

...The same hands, grown to manhood still working the cloth.
They are callused and bleeding from the fingernails.

A bell rings. Harry cracks his back. A sweltering summer sun
blasts through the window. Hair matted with perspiration -
Houdini's grown to strong, handsome, young manhood.

Panting, Theo, 18, enters, tosses Harry a lunch basket.

THEO

Here! Mom cooked this on the sidewalk.

Theo slumps on the bench beside Harry, his clean appearance a
stark contrast to Harry's sweaty skin and apron.

As Harry pours a jug of water over himself, Theo pulls out a book.

HOUDINI

You've the spark to study?

THEO

Study?!

(Theo taps the book)

Here's the life... a yacht, a home in the south
of France, his own theater in Paris.

HOUDINI

Who?

THEO

Robert Houdin. The magician.

Houdini glances over; Theo's at an illustration in the book.

HOUDINI

My ass. You think you can make that kind
of money chopping off peoples' heads?

(laughs)

Nuts, Dash. Everybody'd be doing it.

THEO

Yeah? Well in France, they worshipped
him like a God.

HOUDINI

Theo, if I figured you could earn one
thin dime bamboozling people, you think
I'd be a cutter in this hole?

(flicking his towel)

Stay in school.

(CONTINUED)

19 CONTINUED: (2)

Theo backs into the Foreman, who shoves him.

HOUDINI

Hey!

Houdini stands.

THEO

It's okay, Ehrich, I'm going.

Theo quickly exits. The Foreman stares Harry down.

FOREMAN

You got another job to go to, Jew boy?

HOUDINI

(jaw clenched)

No...

FOREMAN

I didn't hear you.

HOUDINI

No... sir!

The Foreman snorts contempt and leaves. Totally incensed, Houdini stabs his scissors into the table.

Next to the quivering scissors... Theo's magic book.

20 INT/EXT: MAGIC LESSON MONTAGE SEQUENCE 20

On his tenement roof, lips moving, Houdini reads the book by lantern-light. Above... Millions of stars shine in the night.

21 INT: WEISS APARTMENT - DAY 21

The Weiss household clock chimes. Mrs. Weiss dons a shawl and leaves. Another door opens, Houdini peers around.

HOUDINI

She's gone.

22 INT/EXT: MAGIC LESSON MONTAGE SEQUENCE 22

Coins, balls, playing cards fan and twirl in Houdini's hands. Balls bounce, cards fly wildly astray as he fumbles his grip. Houdini's angry. Theo laughs. But can't do any better.

23 INT: WEISS APARTMENT - STAIRWELL - DAY 23

Houdini and Theo struggle to carry a giant wooden packing case up a long narrow set of steps.

- 24 INT/EXT: MAGIC LESSON MONTAGE SEQUENCE 24
A determined Houdini rigorously exercises: push ups, grips, bends.
- 25 EXT: WEISS APARTMENT - ROOFTOP - DAY 25
The door bangs open. Sweating, Theo and Houdini squeeze the crate through the narrow doorway. Pigeons flutter skyward.
- 26 INT/EXT: MAGIC LESSON MONTAGE SEQUENCE 26
Pages flutter... tatter, and age as Houdini paws the magic illustrations over and over and over...
- 27 EXT: WEISS APARTMENT - ROOFTOP - DAY 27
Harry and Theo argue, struggling to drag the crate across the roof.
- 28 INT/EXT: MAGIC LESSON MONTAGE SEQUENCE 28
Hands roped, Houdini gnaws the knots, his lips bleed. Theo grabs his arm, Houdini shakes him off.
- 29 EXT: WEISS APARTMENT - ROOFTOP - DAY 29
Theo lifts the crate lid. Houdini grabs a card from inside and places it near a smoking chimney. "The Houdini Brothers".
- THEO
I still think we should be...
- HOUDINI
"The Weiss Boys?"... And we play to two neighbors and the Rabbi.
- 30 INT/EXT: MAGIC LESSON MONTAGE SEQUENCE 30
Theo watches... as Houdini pesters a ragged elderly Oriental street magician. The old man chases him off.
- 31 EXT: WEISS APARTMENT - ROOFTOP - DAY 31
Determinedly, Theo climbs into the wooden crate.
- THEO
I want to do it this time.
- HOUDINI
Theo!

(CONTINUED)

31 CONTINUED:

THEO
Wanna try it on your own?

Houdini sighs, starts tying Theo's hands behind his back.

32 INT/EXT: MAGIC LESSON MONTAGE SEQUENCE 32

Houdini uses tie factory tools to pry open and study padlocks.
The foreman appears. Instantly Houdini seems to be working.

33 EXT: WEISS APARTMENT - ROOFTOP - DAY 33

Houdini faces the skyline, reads from his notes, over-playing
to an invisible audience.

HOUDINI
Few men dare invoke the forces of nature!
To perform unnatural acts...

Theo calls from inside the box.

THEO
(muffled)
Supernatural!... You make it sound like
we should be arrested.

34 INT/EXT: MAGIC LESSON MONTAGE SEQUENCE 34

Houdini gives the old street magician a bottle of whiskey.
The old magician's hands are bent around Houdini's teaching
him.

35 EXT: WEISS APARTMENT - ROOFTOP - DAY 35

Houdini climbs on the box. Looks skyward.

HOUDINI
When I clap my hands three times...
behold a miracle.

36 INT/EXT: MAGIC LESSON MONTAGE SEQUENCE 36

Houdini sits on the roof staring at the night... his fingers
flicking, each hand cutting a card deck, over and over. His
feet are bare... He's practicing untying knots with his toes.

37 EXT: WEISS APARTMENT - ROOFTOP - DAY 37

Still on the box, Harry pulls an old blanket across a
clothesline. The primitive curtain conceals him.

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI
(behind the blanket)
When I clap my hands three times, behold
a miracle!!! Theo?... THEO!

A loud THUMP THUMP and Theo's voice comes from inside the box.

HOUDINI
You did it again, didn't you?

THEO
(thumping)
It's the wrong knot!

HOUDINI
You'll stay in there 'til you learn the
damn thing.

THEO
(muffled)
So help me I'll split your nose.

38 EXT: GRAVEYARD - DAY

38

Houdini stands in the rain at his father's grave.

HOUDINI
You prayed and waited for miracles. I'm
going to make my own.

Decisively, he places Theo's book on the headstone.

39 INT: SECOND-RATE AGENT'S AUDITIONING ROOM - DAY

39

A greasy agent sits in shirtsleeves, nursing a sandwich. He
all but ignores a fat woman in sequins who dances to "Swanee
River." The agent lofts his opinion into a spittoon.

AGENT
Next.

Tense, Harry and Theo sit on one of the benches surrounded by
eccentric performers: cowboys, sword swallowers, jugglers, etc.

HOUDINI
Show business.

THEO
They look half-starved.

Auditioning, a drunk fire-eater lurches, belching flame.

Harry ducks and bumps into a petite young woman, BESS RAHNER.

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI

Oh, sorry.

BESS

That's all right.

Harry and Theo sit stealing glances at the nervous, pretty eighteen year old Bess. Harry ties and unties a short rope.

BESS

(whisper)

What do you do?

THEO

Magicians.

HOUDINI

Illusionists!

BESS

Uh-huh.

HOUDINI

What do you do?

BESS

Vocalists, the Floral Sisters.

HOUDINI

Oh. I've heard of you.

BESS

This is our first audition.

HOUDINI

Must have been some other sisters.

THEO

This is our first too.

Houdini elbows Theo. Then eyes the bench of odd hopefuls.

HOUDINI

Which one's your sister?

The agent hits the spittoon.

AGENT

Next.

BESS

Oh... She's late.

(CONTINUED)

AGENT

Next!

HOUDINI

Keep your place, we'll go up.

BESS

Thanks.

THEO

(whisper)

I'm not ready.

HOUDINI

You are now.

Panicked, Theo pats his pockets as Harry drags him upright.

THEO

But... handcuffs?

HOUDINI

This pocket. Now what?

THEO

You're on my foot.

The brothers drag their packing crate in front of the agent.

AGENT

What's in it?

THEO

Nothing.

HOUDINI

The dark power of the universe.

AGENT

Show me it, for Christ sake.

Theo snaps the cuffs on Harry, who can't take his eyes off Bess.

THEO

Harry!

HOUDINI

Lay it on thick, Dash.

Houdini climbs into the box.

(CONTINUED)

THEO

Behold the Metamorphosis... We risk our
lives to bring you a feat so awesome that
King Solomon fainted...

AGENT

Yeah, yeah. You're making my ass faint.

Theo pushes Harry down. Locks down the lid and climbs on top.

THEO

When I clap my hands three times...

Theo jerks up a large cloth concealing him and the crate.
Instantly the cloth drops, revealing Houdini in his place.

HOUDINI

...Behold a miracle.

Harry unlocks the box lid... Theo emerges now cuffed.

AGENT

Work up thirty minutes of that, without
the bullshitting, then see me.

AGENT

Next!

HOUDINI

But...

AGENT

I said next. Who are you, honey?

BESS

The Floral sisters.

AGENT

So, where's the others? Or are you gonna
multiply right before my eyes?

BESS

My sister and I sing...
She's not here yet.

AGENT

I'm blind?... So sing or leave.

Houdini steps to the unnerved Bess and whispers.

HOUDINI

Take the chance.

(CONTINUED)

BESS
But I've never... alone.

HOUDINI
Just for me.

Blushing, Bess hands her music to a bored male pianist. He plays. She glances at Harry and attempts a Burlesque song.

BESS
My... My mother taught us... me, many
things... A girl's supposed to know.

She blows it, stops.

BESS
Sorry...

She locks eyes with Houdini. Then turns to the pianist.

BESS
Er... doesn't it say in four-four?

The pianist snorts, starts playing again.

BESS
Thank you.
(she sings)
My mother taught me many things...
A girl's supposed to know.
How to win a husband
How to be just so

The pianist chases Bess up-tempo.

BESS (cont'd)
Play them hard to get, my dear
Don't look them in the eye.
But while I'm sitting on the bench, ma,
Father Time goes dancing by!

She transforms, belts out the brassy number.

BESS (cont'd)
So there's gonna be some changes, ma,
So listen to the news
Your precious little one
Ain't dying in your shoes

Sexy, Bess kicks her shoes across the floor.

Houdini watches Bess, all else in his world vanishes.

40 INT: SECOND RATE AGENT'S AUDITIONING ROOM - LATER

40

The agent has Bess cornered in the deserted room. His slicked hair shiny in the half light.

AGENT

You're a nightingale. Not a lot of girls have your kind of talent, er...?

BESS

Beatrice, my friends call me Bess.

AGENT

Bessie... I could see your name on posters. You'd like that, huh?

Nervous, Bess glances down the empty hall.

BESS

I'd find that hard to believe.

AGENT

It takes someone special to get you there... with big time contacts.

BESS

Well I...

AGENT

Do you know how we seal our deals, Bessie?

He tries to kiss her. Her back's to a wall.

AGENT

Be a smart little bee.

Houdini enters the hall, with Theo. The agent forces himself on Bess, groping her.

BESS

Please... no.

HOUDINI

Just give her a break.

AGENT

She knows what she wants.

Houdini exchanges looks with Bess, moves in.

HOUDINI

She said no.

(CONTINUED)

Houdini yanks the agent off. Viciously, the man throws a jab at Harry, sending him stumbling down in front of Theo.

AGENT

Butt out!

THEO

Harry?

Theo pulls Harry up, his nose is bleeding. Theo recognizes the look in Harry's eyes.

THEO

Ehrich!

Enraged, Houdini walks slowly back.

HOUDINI

I should explain. I take pain, really well.

AGENT

Come and get some more.

The agent braces and throws a flurry of punches. Houdini takes it. The agent's unnerved.

HOUDINI

Now it's my turn.

Harry throws two smashing blows. The agent spins off the wall, grabs at Bess for support, ripping her dress. He falls spread-eagled with the spittoon. Houdini stands, enraged.

HOUDINI

Get up!

The agent retreats, slamming the door.

THEO

You just punched us back into your goddamn tie factory!

HOUDINI

(to Bess)

I... We were waiting for you.

(she bursts into tears)

Are you hurt?

BESS

(touching her dress)

It's from my father's store. I didn't ask.

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI

Look, our Mother takes in sewing. I'm sure she could fix it.

BESS

But my father...

HOUDINI

Doesn't have to know.

41 INT: WESTINGHOUSE RADIO STUDIO - STAGE - NIGHT 41

The mature Bess sits, her thoughts elsewhere, while the candle flames dance. Through their orange veil, macabre Ring Master, Blackburn leans close to the microphone.

BLACKBURN

Tonight, we've surrounded ourselves with Houdini's conjuring effects and escape equipment, his family and friends. And we've asked each guest to bring their own personal memento.

Even the Studio Technicians in their darkened stageside booth are caught by the drama of the moment.

From a case, Theo somberly lays out golden handcuffs.

THEO

Harry willed me these. The Czar of Russia's solid gold handcuffs.

Esther glides her fingertips over the Czar's cuffs.

FLASH INTERCUT:

Like the iron jaws of some ancient beast, gargantuan handcuffs snap closed with the sound of tomb doors.

42 EXT: NEW YORK STREET - NIGHT 42

A figure runs through the crowds...

It's Houdini charging headlong, a man possessed.

43 INT: PAWNSHOP - DAY 43

A man with cracked spectacles eyes Houdini distrustfully across his shop counter.

PAWNBROKER

What do you want?

PAWNBROKER

What do you want?

44 INT: WEISS APARTMENT - KITCHEN - NIGHT

44

The place is better than when we last saw it, new furniture and paint. Houdini's mother finishes sewing the dress. She hands it to Bess, who's behind a screen.

MOTHER

(in Yiddish)

Put it on before you die of cold, child.

Bess peers over the screen to Theo, who's practicing cards.

BESS

What did she say?

THEO

She likes the color of your bloomers.

Bess shakes her head; she knows better.

Breathless, Houdini enters through the front door. A madness in his eyes. He looks for Bess.

HOUDINI

The girl?!... Theo, if you burned me...

Bess steps out from behind the screen.

HOUDINI

Oh. Now I feel like a complete fool.

THEO

Picture perfect.

Bess laughs at him.

HOUDINI

I'm sorry... I was planning to take you... hoping, I mean, to... escort you home... if you'd let me, that is.

THEO

(tossing a coin)

I lost.

BESS

I think I've imposed too much.

HOUDINI

We could walk by Broadway.

(CONTINUED)

BESS

My father wouldn't like that.

HOUDINI

Well, I've made a point of not inviting him.

BESS

Thanks but... it's impossible.

He produces a bouquet of flowers from thin air.

HOUDINI

That's my business.

(implores mother in Yiddish)

Tell her she'll be safe with me.

His mother shakes her head and points at the clock.

MOTHER

(in Yiddish)

A good girl should go straight home.

HOUDINI

My mother says the night air's good for you.

THEO

She said you should go straight home.

BESS

This is like playing blind man's bluff.

MOTHER

(in Yiddish)

You're too young for this kind of thing.

HOUDINI

But I'm not too young to be the man of
this house.

MOTHER

(in Yiddish, gestures)

The little man.

Houdini grabs his coat. Stares his mother down.

45 EXT: MARKET STREET - NIGHT

45

The night-shift of bent immigrant laborers unload cargoes.
Houdini and Bess walk through the night throng, weaving
through market stalls.

BESS

A coin toss?

(CONTINUED)

45 CONTINUED:

HOUDINI
Heads or tails?

He tosses his coin.

BESS
...Heads?

He holds up tails.

HOUDINI
And if you called tails...

He passes his hand, shows her the coin.

BESS
I suspected that.

HOUDINI
They say you're dead a long time, Bess.
I'll only blame me if I waste my chances.

46 EXT: DOCKYARDS - NIGHT

46

They walk past boats. The night-shift of bent immigrant laborers unload their cargoes.

HOUDINI
When I get... lost inside, I come here.

A sweating DOCKWORKER passes by. Waves at Harry.

IRISH DOCKWORKER
Ya bring ya tricks boyo?

Harry pulls a card from thin air.

HOUDINI
Miracles...

47 INT: DOCKWORKERS ALL NIGHT DINER - NIGHT

47

Harry stands near the bar surrounded by ragged workers, from old men to weary boys. Rustic faces, the salt of the earth.

Bess watches, awed, as he stuns a very young man by pulling packs of sewing needles from his ears, eyes, nose.

Playing to the workers and charming Bess, he collects the needles in his mouth until his lips bristle with metal.

He silences the crowd... He chews and we hear the sound of crunching metal. Suddenly, he swallows the needles.

(CONTINUED)

47 CONTINUED:

He winks at the aghast Bess... opens his mouth. Men probe.
It's empty... Houdini produces a roll of thread from mid air.

HOUDINI
(playing to Bess)
Now I'm going to be truly tongue tied.

He feeds the loops into his mouth... the men laugh.

He swallows with a loud gulp! Then, with a grand gesture he gives Bess the end of the thread.

She pulls it from his mouth. Impossibly, needle upon needle, dozens come forth on the thread... the line stretches half way across the diner. Harry stands looking deep into her.

BESS
(laughing)
So...Are you trying to put a spell on me?

HOUDINI
On myself.

Harry shows her his hands... they shake.

HOUDINI
This never happens.

Gently, she takes his hands. Holds them for a moment.

48 INT: DOCKWORKERS ALL NIGHT DINER - NIGHT - LATER

48

A ragged old violinist plays for tips...

Nearby, Bess leads Houdini in a dance. He's out of his element, trying to match her gentle flow.

HOUDINI
Would you believe I've never danced?

BESS
Well...

HOUDINI
Yeah, but I'm not doing that bad?

He trips on her feet. She laughs.

HOUDINI
I can do it, I can do it.

Houdini tries harder... he falls. The violinist stops.

(CONTINUED)

Bess pulls him up. He turns to the violinist.

HOUDINI
Play... please.

The music starts again. Houdini tightens to her. Determined, smiling he looks into her eyes... he starts to whisk her around the room. He pulls her in arcs and whirls.

HOUDINI
Never trust anything where a magician is concerned.

BESS
I'll remember that.

HOUDINI
Maybe I can become a Floral Sister?

BESS
Don't hold your breath.

They dance, oblivious to the world.

BESS
And is this the real you I'm with tonight, or are there a dozen more Jekyll and Hydes?

HOUDINI
A thousand, and you've entranced them all.

BESS
You lie so well.

HOUDINI
Only to entertain. Never to deceive.

BESS
Miracles from lies... how moral. And were you really scared, Mr. Magician?
(he pauses, then nods)
Why?

HOUDINI
Because I don't know what I'm feeling.
But... I don't want it to stop.

He sighs with strange relief... smiles at her.

BESS
What?

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI
(chuckles)
Nothing.

BESS
Did I pass a test?

HOUDINI
No, I did.

BESS
(quietly)
Thank you.

Bess notices fingers of red rippling across the river.

BESS
Oh, my lord... is that the sun?

HOUDINI
I conjured him to meet us here.

BESS
I must have gone mad. What am I gonna do?

HOUDINI
Marry me.

BESS
Be serious.

HOUDINI
I am.

BESS
You hardly know me.

HOUDINI
We're the same, inside. We dream.

BESS
I'm Catholic, you're Jewish, our
families'd never speak to us.

HOUDINI
Wouldn't that be great?

BESS
This isn't funny.

HOUDINI
(kneeling)
Marry me, Bess.

(CONTINUED)

BESS
No one gets married the instant they meet.

HOUDINI
We could.

Torn between terror and joy, she grabs her coat.

BESS
This is all wrong.

Panicked, Bess runs to the exit. Houdini looks crestfallen.

49 EXT: DOCKSIDE MARKET - DAWN

49

Bess' feet fly. She dodges by the market hawkers.

Houdini tries to follow. He's cut off by a horse-cart.
Desperate, he yells.

HOUDINI
Help! Stop her! Stop... thief!
Someone grabs Bess. People surround her.

HOUDINI
Hold her!
Houdini runs up.

BESS
Are you crazy?

MARKET PASSERBY
What did she steal?

HOUDINI
My heart, my soul, my life.

The crowd shrugs and moves away from the exasperated Bess.

BESS
Are you really a madman?

HOUDINI
Since yesterday.

BESS
I'm shaking too much to think.

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI
I can make your fear vanish...
(brushing a tear off her cheek)
Close your eyes.

She closes them. He gently kisses her. She smiles.

BESS
That's cheating.

HOUDINI
Did it vanish?

BESS
That's not magic.

HOUDINI
It is to me.

They kiss again. She draws back, puts her hand to her mouth.

BESS
What's this?

She holds up a small gold wedding band.

HOUDINI
While Theo was supposed to be guarding you.

BESS
You couldn't know.

HOUDINI
Inside. I had something engraved.

She reads inside the ring.

BESS
B. E. L. I... "Believe."

He pushes it on her finger.

BESS
Oh God, you're serious.

HOUDINI
Anytime you sense a shred of doubt, about
anything. Those letters touch your skin.

BESS
Harry?

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI
(kneeling)
Miss Beatrice Rahner. Marry me. Together,
we'll be the world's most enchanted lovers.
We'll have our own act, we'll be the biggest
things in show business. We'd better be, I
still have to pay for the ring.

BESS
I'm afraid. What if...?

HOUDINI
Believe.

BESS
But my family?

HOUDINI
Believe...

BESS
I...

He lifts his fingertips to her lips.

HOUDINI
(whisper)
Believe.

Tears in her eyes... Bess stares at the ring on her hand.

50 INT: WESTINGHOUSE RADIO STUDIO - STAGE - NIGHT

50

Outside the theater, distant thunder rolls. At the seance
table a bluff, tall younger man pipes up, WALTER GIBSON.

GIBSON
Let's just make this clear, I'm here for
Bess. I'm gonna make sure no hoodoo faker
gets her ten grand.

Esther smiles disarmingly at Gibson.

ESTHER
I promise, if I am able to bring about a
contact tonight, I'll limit my reward to
the joy of reuniting a loved one.

GIBSON
Twist your words anyway you like.

He looks at Bess, he wants to say more, thinks better of it.

(CONTINUED)

ACT III

FADE IN:

50 INT: WESTINGHOUSE RADIO STUDIO - STAGE - NIGHT

50

Outside the theater, distant thunder rolls. At the seance table a bluff, tall younger man pipes up, **JIM COLLINS**.

COLLINS

Let's just make this clear, I'm **the last of Harry's assistants**. We all **signed loyalty contracts**, I'm here to honor mine, for him and Bess. I'm gonna make sure no hoodoo faker gets her ten grand.

Esther smiles disarmingly at Collins.

ESTHER

I promise I'll limit my reward to the joy of reuniting a loved one.

COLLINS

Twist your words anyway you like.

He looks at Bess, he wants to say more, thinks better of it.

COLLINS

This was in my hand every night, till **Harry's** last performance.

Jim Collins clumps an ax on the table in front of Esther.

A51

FLASH INTERCUT: A51

Houdini twirls head down from a chain. Taloned hands grab him. Like drowning a witch, they plunge him head down into water.

DISSOLVE TO:

51 INT: CHEAP SALOON THEATER - BACKSTAGE - LATE 1890'S - NIGHT 51

Houdini and Bess finish the Metamorphosis Act. It didn't go well... they hustle off stage. The next act hurries on as the crowd sneers.

Bess uses a damp towel, dabs Houdini's swollen wrists.

HOUDINI

Damn handcuffs stuck again.

(CONTINUED)

51 CONTINUED:

51

BESS
I thought you covered it well.

(CONTINUED)

BESS

Five years, from medicine shows to pool halls, I've watched other people go off to the big circuit while I'm selling toothpaste backstage to buy us clothes. I don't understand anymore. Your brother's a foreman, he makes four times what we do.

HOUDINI

I don't want her to think I'm a failure.

He pulls his shoe off, it has a hole in it. Bess giggles.

HOUDINI

Hell! Hell!!! I'm through with magic!

(a beat)

From now on I'll sell toothpaste.

BESS

Be my guest.

HOUDINI

I'll ram it down their throats. Handfuls of it. Mountains of it, Moons of it... We'll be toothpaste Czars.

BESS

Harry.

A knock at the door.

A man in his forties lets himself in. MARTIN BECK, mustached, a slight German accent. A man who's fought to mold one of the greatest Vaudeville circuits.

BECK

I haul my ass halfway across America for another hat and rabbit act! You got a lot of nerve, young man.

HOUDINI

It wasn't our best night.

Beck takes Bess' hand.

BECK

Mrs. Houdini, Martin Beck. You looked delightful up there.

BESS

Thank you for coming, Mr. Beck.

(CONTINUED)

BECK

I wish your act had half the pizzazz of
the lies your husband spun in his wires.

BESS

He wasn't lying.

BECK

Look, they've seen everything. You gotta
jerk 'em out of their seats. You'd have to
do that quick change thing with the box on
fire or something, now that'd be scary.

HOUDINI

There's not a circuit in America that'd
let me use fire on their stage.

BESS

I believe in my husband. Give him a
chance.

BECK

I like the way she sticks up for you.

Beck sighs and moves to the door.

BECK

Well, thanks for nothing.

Harry glances at Bess.

Desperate, he grabs Beck's arm.

HOUDINI

Wait. You know what I hear about fire?
People don't burn to death. They die
because they can't breathe. Asphyxiated
before the fire ever gets to them.

(he toys with his handcuffs)

What if I put an act on stage that would
put the fear of God into an audience?

BECK

Like what?

HOUDINI

A deathtrap that happens in seconds, that
every soul in that audience understands?
And no theater would stop us from
performing?

BESS

Harry, what are you...?

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI

Will you book an act that if I don't succeed,
the audience knows I'm a dead man?

BECK

Such as?

Houdini sinks his hands deep in the water bowl.

HOUDINI

Drowning.

BECK

I'll give you a try out on my Orpheum tour.
And it better jerk me out of my seat.

(kisses Bess' hand)

Good night, Mrs. Houdini.

(to Houdini as he exits)

Make sure she's in your act. Men like to
look at a woman like your wife.

HOUDINI

We got a manager.

BESS

He didn't say he'd take us.

HOUDINI

He will. You're my good luck.

BESS

I don't understand.

HOUDINI

You're the reason he came back here. And
now I have to come up with something that
scares the living daylights out of him.

BESS

I don't want you risking your life.

HOUDINI

What's inside the ring?

BESS

Not this.

HOUDINI

How much courage do you have, Mrs. Houdini?

(he pulls her close)

Believe.

52 INT: TINY HOTEL BATHROOM - NIGHT

52

Harry is face up under the water, his face is anguished. Bess observes, stopwatch in hand. He bursts up. Sucks air...

HOUDINI
Aaahh!!! Well?

BESS
Two twenty... not enough if something goes wrong.

HOUDINI
(he splashes her)
Be gone. No pessimists allowed in this bathroom.

BESS
Beast.

HOUDINI
Rabid beast.

BESS
I should run.

HOUDINI
Yes...

She leans closer...

HOUDINI
Run.

They kiss.

BESS
I can't run in these.

She slides her bloomers down.

Harry watches bemused.

She climbs half-naked into the tub with him. Water splashes.

HOUDINI
Careful. They'll throw us out.

Her hands stroke him underwater. He gives his body to her.

BESS
I know how to make something disappear.

(CONTINUED)

52 CONTINUED:

She straddles him.

BESS

How much courage do you have, Mr. Houdini.

He buries his face in her neck.

53 INT: GRAND 1890'S THEATER - NIGHT

53

In mid-performance, Houdini paces the theater's aisles.
Spellbinding the audience.

HOUDINI

How much courage do you have? I invite
each and every one of you to venture with
me into a little experiment... in terror.
I assure you, there will be no physical
danger, but as to the state of your mind,
there are no assurances.

Houdini claps. An aide in an executioner's hood unveils a
giant glass countdown timer, in minutes and seconds.

HOUDINI

Every member of this audience, I mean
everyone! Raise your right hand!... Good.
And you, sir... We are about to discover the
mortal limits of our bodies. Please, all
together take one giant, life-giving breath of
air. NOW!... Bess.

Bess starts the clock. A fast ominous tick.

HOUDINI

Good! Hold it as long as you humanly can.

Like a revivalist preacher, Houdini moves amongst the aisles.

HOUDINI

Tonight, for the price of one seat, you
can experience life on the edge of the
grim reaper's scythe. Hold! Drop your
hand only when you are utterly forced to!

He vaults onto the stage and claps his hands urgently.
A mysterious covered object is wheeled forward by the
executioner.

HOUDINI

The essence of danger is the frailty of
the human body.

With a flourish he unveils a milk can.

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI

Why would one fear something as rustic
and charming as this farmer's milk churn?

He turns, winks at Bess. The ticking drives his words.

HOUDINI

Over there! She put her hand down. Bess,
please mark the time of our first fatality.

BESS

Twenty-five seconds.

Bess chalks a big red cross on the clock. A death mark!

HOUDINI

How, could this rusty rural implement be
a deadly chariot to the promised land?

Startlingly, he hits it so hard it rings like a bell.

HOUDINI

What dangers can something like this
present unless it fell on your head?

(he salutes)

Another one Bess!

BESS

Thirty one seconds.

HOUDINI

And another two, there and there.

BESS

Thirty four, five.

HOUDINI

How frail is the human body? Eight pints of
blood, one could bleed for quite some time
without expiring. Where is the danger?

His fingers point frenziedly. Bess chalks wildly.

HOUDINI

There, there! The women going first.
Deepest sympathy, ladies.

BESS

Forty one, two... coming too quickly.

Bess grabs fresh chalk, concentrates on marking.

Houdini claps. The executioner pours water into the churn.

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI

Water, it looks so innocent, yet it's so vital to our lives. They say we even evolved from it, leaving our brethren fishes behind. But to return to its soft embrace is to risk everything.

He paces the stage words pouring forth, a hypnotic dervish.

HOUDINI

Aha! Our first man. Don't take up rowing. I've met with people who came near to drowning, sunk with boats, fell through the ice. I was curious...

At the rear of the theater, one man seems unmoved... Beck.

HOUDINI

Can you imagine drowning? Your heart palpitates, your veins swell up. Strangely, the body sweats, even in cold water. You fight unconsciousness. The brain flares, white fire hallucinations. Another last gasp! My deepest condolences to your family. Just precious seconds of life left. Your lungs push at your chest, demanding, cursing, hating you for keeping your lips closed... Not knowing or understanding you would suck death between your teeth. Now it's fast and furious. They all say it's true... your whole life does flash before you!

The executioner rips at Houdini's clothes. They strip away. Beneath he is dressed in his bathing suit.

HOUDINI

Would my committee of volunteers from the audience step forward?

Three men from the audience move in. Harry motions them to inspect the milk churn.

HOUDINI

My life is at stake, I like to make sure everything is on the up and up. Examine every part of this metal tomb. And the chains, the locks, the straps. And sir, in the hat, you get to rest, under six feet of honest earth for eternity. Gentlemen, are you quite satisfied?

(CONTINUED)

FIRST VOLUNTEER

Quite.

SECOND VOLUNTEER

What about trap doors in the floor?

HOUDINI

Choose any part of the stage and I'll have it moved.

SECOND VOLUNTEER

There.

Houdini claps. The executioner rolls the sloshing churn.

HOUDINI

Sir, with the beard, our last hero. Hold on, the ship's foundering, there's still hope, Your face reddens, your tongue swells... Too bad, sir! Say hi to Davey Jones. One minute and forty seven seconds! Excellent. Mark it, Bess. Now, take these hand cuffs. They held a murderer until he hung in the Los Angeles jail. Test them. Try again. Satisfied?

Houdini slams his fist into his abdomen. The impact resounds.

HOUDINI

Every tissue, every fiber, is trained to the highest caliber that the human animal can achieve. I pride myself on my tolerance for pain... Shackle me.

The men cuff Houdini behind his back.

HOUDINI

Tighter! I am about to be bundled like a child inside my mother's birth canal. My thoughts will be claustrophobia, drowning, entrapment. Am I secure?

FIRST VOLUNTEER

I think so.

HOUDINI

You must be completely satisfied.

SECOND VOLUNTEER

(wrenches at cuffs)

All right.

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI

If the unforeseen happens and something goes terribly wrong, my beautiful assistant will order the milk churn smashed and do everything possible to save my life. Lift me!

Houdini slips on the wet stage. Falls heavily.

BESS

Harry?

HOUDINI

It's okay, Bessie. Help me up.

Bess grabs his arm. He groans pain, fights to stand, looking weak. She whispers, trying to persuade him to stop.

HOUDINI

(suffering)

No, I... All these people.

(glancing at Beck)

Let me share one secret with you. My assistant is Bess Houdini, my wife. She doesn't like this act. But she's beside me. I'm a lucky man. Gentlemen. Help me.

People clap. Harry is lifted into the churn, water sloshes. He stares at Bess, hypnotizing the audience with her fear.

HOUDINI

The last face I want to see.

(they kiss)

I love you. Reset the clock!

Bess runs to the clock. Restarts it.

HOUDINI

NOW!!!!

A last bucket fills the can. The executioner slams the lid down. Snap! Snap! Snap! Leather straps and six padlocks later. The committee slides four large screens around the churn.

Bess looks to the back of the theater. Beck stands watching.

A spotlight shines onto the translucent clock. Its giant shadow image looms over the stage.

Now the executioner chants out the times.

Bess paces, eyeing the clock. It ticks fast like a drum.

(CONTINUED)

The audience members stare, transfixed.

15 seconds: Standing like guardsmen, members of the committee unconsciously look at their watches.

25 seconds: Bess turns to face the shadow clock.

Its hands tick to the first death mark.

As people see the hands touch their death marks they flinch.

45 SECONDS: Bess sighs, paces, smiles at the audience, trying to hide her nervousness.

ONE MINUTE: The executioner places his ax on a table, rubs fear-sweat off his hands with a rag.

ONE FIFTEEN: Bess backs into the table, the ax falls to the floor with a THUMP making everyone jump. Embarrassed, she picks it up, the executioner takes it.

Martin Beck bites his lips. Everyone glances at the clock.

ONE THIRTY: Bess walks back across the stage. Stands outside the screens, listens intense. Death marks pass.

ONE FORTY-FIVE: Like sweat, water drops from the churn's lid.

ONE FORTY-SEVEN: The executioner signals Bess' final mark.

A hand cranked siren wails. The committee members turn to stare at the clock, mesmerized.

Patrons leave their seats, silently gather below the stage.

TWO MINUTES: Tense, Bess stares eye to eye with the executioner.

She walks to the stage's edge. Thinking she's out of view, talks to the manager. Their shadows visible from the wings. Bess points to her body, obviously explaining where Houdini was hurt.

TWO FIFTEEN: All the time the clock ticks away. LOUDER, PULSING, URGENT, FRIGHTENING. Freaking. Bess walks quickly back to the center of the stage, listens to the screens.

TWO THIRTY: The clock is now well past the death points. Bess walks to the executioner, the man whispers, concerned. She shakes her head, takes the ax from his hands, stands wavering.

TWO FORTY: The manager walks on stage and argues with Bess.

TWO FIFTY: Beck is now stage-side. The committee members cluster.

(CONTINUED)

53 CONTINUED: (6)

THREE MINUTES: The executioner's voice wavers. One of the committee demands the ax. Bess shakes her head. "No, wait!"

THREE TEN: The manager runs off stage preparing for trouble.

THREE TWENTY: The drum pounding of the clock is overwhelming.

Bess is close to tears, the men argue with each other.

BECK
(shouting)
"Come on, do something!"

THREE THIRTY: Bess takes one last look at the clock, her chest heaving with emotion. She moves to the screen, ax raised, ready to smash the thing and save Harry.

SOMEONE SCREAMS. THE SCREENS SCATTER, CRASHING DOWN.

Houdini pitches forward. Collapses. Soaking, bleeding.

Bess falls on her knees, cradles him. Trembling, he touches her. The audience cheers exulted as Harry breaks down, cries with relief. Harry hears the applause... It's a siren song, it intoxicates.

54 INT: GRAND 1890'S THEATER - DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT 54

Bess massages Harry's back. Beck stands sweating, drained.

HOUDINI
Well, Mr. Beck?

BECK
See my lawyers tomorrow. I'll have a contract you can't get out of so easily. Bess, make sure he doesn't kill himself.

BESS
(smiles at Harry)
I'll try.

55 INT: HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT 55

A single steel shaft lowers onto a spinning Edison cylinder.

A crackling gentle waltz flows from a black horn that still has the price tag on it.

In a tiny hotel room filled with packing cases and magic paraphernalia two figures dance silhouetted against a moon filled window. Their lips meet, lost in each other.

(CONTINUED)

55 CONTINUED:

Bloodied handcuffs hang nearby in the fading gas light.

56 INT. WESTINGHOUSE RADIO STUDIO - STAGE - NIGHT

56

Esther takes Bess' hand, comforting her.

ESTHER
Mrs. Houdini?

BESS
I, I ... I... forgot to bring something.

ESTHER
I sense these last years have not been
easy. I will put my entire heart tonight
into helping find the one you search for.

BESS
Thank you. I have something I want to say.

Bess unfolds a handwritten note, puts on glasses.

BESS
Harry, this is your Bess. I pray what we
do here is right. We do it out of love...
Harry, come to us, please.

ESTHER
Could we all touch hands?

Esther holds Bess and Theo's hands, the others link around.

From on high, the small group of humans at the table are
almost dwarfed in the gloom of the old theater palace.

Esther begins to fall into a strange state.

ESTHER
May the walls crumble between us.

Her body undulates, her head softly jerks from side to side.

ESTHER
(calling)
Harry Houdini... Ehrich Weiss...

FLASH INTERCUT:

The adult Houdini stares at us, anguish. Flesh bleached.

HOUDINI (V.O.)
Take my advice, laugh at Death...

(CONTINUED)

56 CONTINUED:

His hair waves strangely. His mouth opens to scream...

HOUDINI (V. O.)
Confuse Death. Embarrass him.

Bubbles and blood lunge forth. He's underwater.

57 INT: VAST THEATER - ILLUSION MONTAGE - NIGHT 57

Houdini speaks from the stage. Voice echoing into the mist.

Projected lantern-slide images illuminate the stage.

Posters, headlines, banners flare. "CHALLENGE!"

HOUDINI
Stare him in the eye! I've been buried
alive...

Graveside, Bess throws a hand-full of dirt. It spreads over
Harry enclosed in a glass windowed coffin. Soil cascades.

HOUDINI (V.O.)
Strapped to a cannon...

Lashed to the barrel. Bess looks at him, closes her eyes.
Houdini dives away as the gun blasts.

Bess assists as men padlock Houdini in layers of chain.

HOUDINI (V.O.)
Like a mad hara-kiri... I've leapt
handcuffed and chained, heavier than ten
men, from bridges all around the world.

Houdini leaps from the rail of a high bridge. Bess watches
his body plunge and envelope in a vast plume of water.

HOUDINI (V.O.)
One slip is a journey into Death's jaws.

Twenty feet underwater, Houdini lays on the riverbed. He
kicks a shoe off, a metal lock pick is gripped in his toes.

At the rail, Beck offers his flask to Bess, she waves it off.

Wriggling like a snake trying to break its skin, Harry
transfers the pick to his teeth and levers it into the lock.

HOUDINI (V.O.)
I cheated my dark friend a thousand times.

(CONTINUED)

The images come spiraling at us. Prisons, packing cases, padded cells, insane cribs...

Photographers jostle. Men surround Houdini, raise their hats. Painted on their bald heads, letters spell H-O-U-D-I-N-I.

Flash powder ignites. Bess lights a candle at an altar.

Headlines sear across the page. Box office hands flash coins.

Bess watches at Houdini's side as he pulls coins from the ears of children. Their open-eyed wonder brings her joy. Bess stares at their faces, gently pulls Harry close to her.

On stage. The screens fall again and again. Audiences gasp.

Press flashbulbs flare. Interspersed with yelling reporters and blazing headlines, we see Houdini in a variety of graveyards... smiling, posed with the tombstones of famous men.

Bloodied and bruised. Breathing hard, Houdini talks to the press.

HOUDINI

I alone invented the escape act. Those Hordini's, Stillini's and Voodini's that copy me are thieves. Whatever man's invention has conceived, I can escape from it. No thing in heaven, Earth or hell will hold me.

Yelling, panicked men hack at a frozen River. A dark figure clings in an air bubble looking up through the ice, Houdini.

HOUDINI (V.O.)

I've risen more times than a Christ from a thousand Bibles.

Bess turns from the crowd and crosses herself, in gratitude.

REPORTERS (V.O.)

Are you double-jointed?... Do you swallow keys?... Hide them up anywhere, personal?...

Wet, shivering, wrapped in blankets, Harry answers reporters.

HOUDINI

My mind is the key that sets me free.

REPORTERS

You must use doubles?... Is it true, you have pockets sewn into your flesh?... Are you psychic?

(CONTINUED)

57l ON STAGE: 57l

The screens fall again and again. Audiences gasp.

57j HEADLINES SEAR ACROSS THE PAGE: 57j

"THE HOUDINI'S" - "HOUDINI" - "HIM!!!"

Press flashbulbs flare as a continuous motif.

Interspersed with yelling reporters and blazing headlines...

57m HOUDINI IN A VARIETY OF GRAVEYARDS: 57m

Smiling, posed with the tombstones of famous men.

57n HOUDINI TALKS TO THE PRESS: 57n

Bloodied and bruised. Breathing hard...

HOUDINI

I alone invented the escape act. Those Houdini's, Stillini's and Voodini's that copy me are thieves. Whatever man's invention has conceived, I can escape from it. No thing in heaven, Earth or hell will hold me.

57o SNOW ENVIRONMENT: 57o

Yelling, panicked men hack at a frozen River. A dark figure clings in an air bubble looking up through the ice, Houdini.

HOUDINI (V.O.)

I've risen more times than a Christ from a thousand Bibles.

A man from the crowd offers Bess a drink. She refuses it, crosses herself.

57q THREE REPORTERS FIRE QUESTIONS AT HOUDINI. 57q

REPORTERS #1, #2, #3

Are you double-jointed?

Do you swallow keys?

Hide them up anywhere, personal?...

Wet, shivering, wrapped in blankets, Harry answers them.

HOUDINI

My methods are beyond your imagination.

*

(CONTINUED)

57q CONTINUED:

57q

REPORTERS #1, #2, #3

You must use doubles?

Is it true you have pockets sewn into
your flesh?

Are you psychic?

(CONTINUED)

With gut-churning acrobatics, Houdini struggles and finally emerges, shirt torn, dripping sweat, face bleeding, triumphant.

59 INT: WESTINGHOUSE RADIO STUDIO - STAGE - NIGHT 59

Esther strains, writhes, gasps...

Outside the theater, distant thunder rolls closer.

BLACKBURN

(whisper)

Esther is slowly allowing herself to be swept into the realm of the unknowable.

ESTHER

Take this vessel... I am your portal.

BLACKBURN

(commentating)

Her body writhes and twists like a drowning person.

ESTHER

I feel... I feel someone...

Bess, Theo, the others lean forward.

ESTHER

I feel... suffering.

BLACKBURN

Is it him?

Almost in answer, the studio lights flare... Thunder booms. The table thumps. Bess jerks, truly frightened.

BESS

Oh, God!

The studio lights go dark only the candles remain. Gibson touches Bess gently.

GIBSON

He's got a sense of humor tonight.

Theo checks Esther, who moans, her nose bleeds.

THEO

Are you all right?

A technician opens the booth door.

(CONTINUED)

TECHNICIAN

Ray, I think lightning struck our aerial.
The transmitter's off the air.

BLACKBURN

Damn!

FLASHCUT - INSERT

Thunder... A monstrous demon hoisting Houdini upside-down,
above the fearsome looking "Chinese Water Torture Chamber".
An 8 foot high, lethal glass fronted cage-tank. A poster.

60 INT: HOUDINI HOUSE - NIGHT

60

Upside down, Houdini dangles over a prototype of the device.
Ten years have passed. A voice calls.

BESS (O.C.)

Harry, it's ten minutes away. Your mother
and Theo are here.

Bess enters, dressed for New Year's Eve, instantly assesses
the water torture chamber.

BESS

Lord. What are you doing?

She studies him hanging. Tests the metal caging the chamber.

BESS

What if something goes wrong? Those
prison bars, I couldn't get to you.

HOUDINI

Martin and I were talking.

BESS

Great. Why doesn't he hang upside down?

HOUDINI

Because he'd die of fright before we got
his shoes strapped.

He unhooks and rights himself and climbs down. The room is
circa 1913 - plush furniture, but Houdini has become a
maniacal pack-rat.

Magic paraphernalia, all over. Locks and picks, Magicians'
posters and bizarre mementos. Torture instruments, grave
markers, witchcraft dolls, photos of circus freaks, the
Elephant Man's autograph.

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI

(Yiddish subtitles)

No, we were just coming.

(he dabs Bess' cheek)

Cheer up, for the family.

BESS

And what am I? Sometimes I think you
build your whole world to impress her.

A hesitant tap at the door, followed by Houdini's mother.
She's older, frail, has a cane.

MOTHER

(Yiddish subtitles)

Am I interrupting something?

BESS

(Yiddish subtitles)

Of course not.

MOTHER

(Yiddish subtitles)

I was worried you were going to miss the
New Year.

BESS

(Yiddish subtitles)

We wouldn't do that.

Theo runs in, with champagne. A clock starts to chime.

THEO

It's twelve.

(he takes in the atmosphere)

Everyone's overwhelmed by the New Year I
see. Well... er, Mother's been practicing
her English. Mamma?

MOTHER

(accent)

Ehrich... Happy... New Year.

His mother shakes Harry's hand. They do not embrace.

MOTHER

(accent)

Your fadder would be proud of you.

HOUDINI

I know. Happy New Year, Mamma.

Theo hugs Bess.

(CONTINUED)

THEO

Story of my life. I saw her first. But
you're the lucky one.

HOUDINI

Yeah.

Harry moves to Bess, takes her hand.

HOUDINI

But, sometimes I need reminding.

BESS

Is this Mr. Weiss speaking?

HOUDINI

You tell me.

He kisses her, but it is distant.

61 EXT: HOUDINI HOUSE - NIGHT

61

While Bess and Theo talk at the door, Houdini helps his mother
into a waiting cab. She takes advantage of being alone with him.

MOTHER

(Yiddish subtitles)

Ehrich, you must talk to your brother, he
needs your help. The factory closed.

HOUDINI

(Yiddish subtitles)

Momma, come home to Hungary with me, and
I'll take care of Theo.

THEO

(arriving)

What are you plotting for me? You know
she hates traveling.

HOUDINI

She can see me perform for the royalty of
her mother country.

THEO

Momma, I can to talk to Ehrich for
myself. Harry... I need a job. They
brought in a machine that does the work
of ten men and it's never heard the word,
union. This is really hard... Could I be
on that tour? Could we be the Houdini
Brothers again?

(CONTINUED)

MOTHER

(in Yiddish)

Ehrich? Are you going to stay up there
all night?

HOUDINI

(in Yiddish)

No, we were just coming.

(English, dabs Bess' cheek)

We wouldn't miss the New Year.

Cheer up, for the family.

BESS

And what am I? Sometimes I think you
build your whole world to impress her.A hesitant tap at the door, followed by Houdini's mother.
She's older, frail, has a cane.

MOTHER

(in Yiddish)

Am I interrupting something?

BESS

(in Yiddish)

Of course not.

MOTHER

(in Yiddish, tapping her
watch)I was worried you were going to miss the
New Year.

BESS

We wouldn't do that.

Theo runs in, with champagne. A clock starts to chime.

THEO

It's twelve.

(he takes in the atmosphere)

Everyone's overwhelmed by the New Year I
see. Well... er, Mother's been practicing
her English. Mamma?

MOTHER

(accent)

Ehrich... Happy... New Year.

His mother shakes Harry's hand. They do not embrace.

(CONTINUED)

MOTHER
(accent)
Your fadder vould be proud of you.

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI

I know. Happy New Year, Mamma.

Theo hugs Bess.

THEO

Story of my life. I saw her first. But
you're the lucky one.

HOUDINI

Yeah.

Harry moves to Bess, takes her hand.

HOUDINI

But, sometimes I need reminding.

BESS

Is this Mr. Weiss speaking?

HOUDINI

You tell me.

He kisses her, but it is distant.

61 EXT: HOUDINI BROWNSTONE - NIGHT

61

While Bess and Theo talk at the door, Houdini helps his mother
into a waiting cab. She takes advantage of being alone with him.

MOTHER

(in Yiddish)

Ehrich, you must talk to your brother,
Theo needs your help. The factory closed. *

HOUDINI

Momma, come home to Hungary with me, and
I'll take care of Theo. *

THEO

(arriving)

What are you plotting for me? You know
she hates traveling.

HOUDINI

She can see me perform for the royalty of
her mother country.

THEO

Momma, I can to talk to Ehrich for
myself. Harry... I need a job.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

61 CONTINUED:

THEO (cont'd)

They brought in a machine that does the work of ten men and it's never heard the word, union. This is really hard... Could I be on that tour? Could we be the Houdini Brothers again?

Houdini hesitates. A light snow dusting the two men.

HOUDINI

Okay, we'll work something out.

THEO

That's great, Harry.

HOUDINI

I've got some duplicate equipment. A metamorphosis, a lady vanish, a swami rope climb, nothing too dangerous.

(Theo loses his smile)

I could get you bookings on the Orpheum. If you get a pretty lady in the act. We can find you a name.

THEO

I don't understand...

HOUDINI

It would be confusing, two Houdinis.

Bess watches, alone at the top of the porch steps.

THEO

Gee, Harry, thanks. I started you in this damn thing, and now you want me to eat your scraps. I'll do it on my own.

MOTHER

(in Yiddish)

Please, don't argue.

HOUDINI

I went through hell to know what I know. I've been laughed at. Broken my bones. I've come as close to death as a man can come. I've earned what I am. I love you, Theo, I can put you on a stage tomorrow and you'll make a better living than you ever dreamed. You know that's the truth. But there'll only be one Houdini.

62 EXT: WESTINGHOUSE RADIO STUDIO - ROOF - NIGHT

62

Lightning flashes. Rain slashes.

(CONTINUED)

Esther meditates. Bess is by the original milk churn...
Touches it, closing her eyes. Gibson joins her.

GIBSON
Memories?

BESS
Too many, Wally.

Blackburn talks to his frantic technician.

BLACKBURN
Come on, Jimmy! How we doing?

TECHNICIAN
Another few minutes.

BLACKBURN
Christ, they'll all be tuning us out.

TECHNICIAN
They're risking their lives, Ray.

BLACKBURN
That's what they're paid for!

The technician bites back a response.

GIBSON
Bring on the whips and chains!

BLACKBURN
(approaching Bess)
I'm sorry. This is a mess.. I just want
so much for you to have this evening...

BESS
Harry'd be on the phone to the papers,
right now.

BLACKBURN
Saying what?

BESS
"Halloween spirits trick radio show".
He could make the worst situation look
like a plan. And...

64 INT: BERLIN THEATER STAGE - NIGHT

64

Clock hands stand ready. The milk churn escape is in process.

(CONTINUED)

62 CONTINUED:

62

The Technician watches as Two Workers frantically struggle to repair the antenna tower. The Technician hurries off.

63 INT: WESTINGHOUSE RADIO STUDIO - STAGE - NIGHT

63

The participants wait in small groups. Theo smokes alone.

Esther meditates. Bess is by the original milk can... Touches it, closing her eyes. Collins joins her.

COLLINS

Memories?

BESS

Too many, Wally.

The Technician enters, soaking wet.

BLACKBURN

Jimmy! How we doing?

TECHNICIAN

Another few minutes.

BLACKBURN

Hell, they'll all be tuning us out.

TECHNICIAN

They're risking their lives, Ray.

BLACKBURN

That's what they're paid for!

The technician bites back a response.

BESS

Harry'd be on the phone to the papers,
right now.

BLACKBURN

Saying what?

BESS

"Halloween spirits trick radio show".
He could make the worst situation look
like a plan. And...

64 INT: KAISER'S PALACE - NIGHT

64

The KAISER struggles to hold his breath, bright red. A
gasp... his hand falls.

*
*

(CONTINUED)

BESS (V.O.)
...His plan was to own every soul in the audience.

Bess appears next to the executioner.

HOUDINI
(in chains)
My wonderful German friends, if the unforeseen happens and something goes terribly wrong, my beautiful assistant will do everything possible to smash the milk can and save my life.

A translator repeats his words in German.

HOUDINI
Help me into the churn, please.

German police with spiked helmets start toward Houdini.

BESS (V.O.)
No one ever asked us why a man as skilled as Harry, seven nights a week, twice a day on weekends...

Houdini slips on the water. Falls heavily, fights to stand.

BESS (V.O. cont'd)
(with a small laugh)
...always managed to slip on the same wet floor and injure himself.

Bess grabs his arm, whispers, trying to persuade him to stop.

HOUDINI
All these people are here to see me. I'm not going to fail them.
(waving Bess off)
Please help me into the churn.

Bess looks anguished.

BESS (V.O.)
Although the audience never knew it, Harry choreographed my every move. I had to carry all their fears and hopes.

Harry's lifted into the churn, staring at her.

HOUDINI
The last face I want to see.

(CONTINUED)

They kiss.

HOUDINI

I love you, Bess. Reset the clock!

Bess runs to the clock, restarts it.

HOUDINI

NOW!!!!

Water sloshes over. The camera rotates, until we are behind the milk churn staring into the stage lights.

BESS (V.O.)

Or the escape itself. Why so many locks?
If you're to drown, one lock would seem
quite terminal. Ah, but to the un-
informed, the more locks, the more dread.

The lid is slammed down, clamped, padlocked.

The committee slides the screens around the churn. Bess paces, watching the clock. It ticks like a drum. The orchestra picks up the theme. The executioner chants the times in German.

15 SECONDS: Standing like guardsmen, members of the police volunteers unconsciously look at their watches.

BESS (V.O.)

And I'm not saying there was no danger.
Anyone, even if they discovered his secrets,
would have the courage, or physical ability
to attempt them.

25 SECONDS: BEHIND THE SCREENS: The churn wobbles. The top of the churn turns against its restraining straps.

BESS (V.O.)

A moment of panic, a bent rivet, a smudge of
rust and my husband would die. No one could
know, not even me.

35 SECONDS: Houdini, underwater inside the can. His eyes open, staring. A trickle of bubbles breaks from his lips.

BESS (V.O.)

No trapdoors, no doubles. Just sheer gut
strength and willpower.

45 SECONDS: The churn top slides upward, stretching the leather straps. A hand snakes out...

(CONTINUED)

Carefully, Houdini forces his head up between the straps. Like a moth from a chrysalis, he strains to squeeze his whole body down to the floor.

BESS (V.O.)
Why didn't he show himself more quickly?
He knew the audience would think it was
too easy... every minute built the
climax.

55 SECONDS: Houdini silently replaces the lid. He spies on the clock, its hands tick to the first death mark.

He smiles, sits on the churn, relaxes.

BESS (V.O.)
The seconds drag into minutes.

The faces of the audience. Peasants, priests, mayors, mothers and the Kaiser himself. Compelled, fascinated, horrified.

BESS (V.O.)
Every night I'd see them. Watching that
clock, biting their nails. Is he sick?
Has he fainted? More time passes. The
tension becomes unbearable.

Bess walks past with the ax, acting tense.

BESS (V.O.)
Do they really believe I, a woman, could
save him with that ax?

A siren wails. The hands pass the final death mark.

BESS (V.O.)
Now every soul in that audience is
united in terror by Harry's imagination.

Men can't look away. Women pray.

BESS (V.O.)
It's funny what people are willing to pay
money for.

Houdini waits behind the screen, composed, patient. Reading!

BESS (V.O.)
In their hearts, every one of them knows,
they'd be dead...

Harry nonchalantly stows his book, lifts a concealed flap on a screen. Removes a blade. Quietly rips his shirt and pants.

(CONTINUED)

BESS (V.O.)

No one thought to check the screens.

Houdini streaks a concealed blood-like dye on his face.

BESS (V.O.)

The instant that the tension cannot be
raised an iota more. And we must smash
the churn...

Houdini cups water over his face.

Bess runs forward. On cue, Houdini transforms, staggers
forth, topples the screens, collapses onto the stage.

BESS (V.O.)

Houdini returns from the dead, in one
immortal ovation.

The audience is on its feet. Applause like thunder.

65 INT: BERLIN THEATER - BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

65

The executioner yanks his mask off. A sweaty grin. It's a
younger Walter Gibson. Harry takes a towel from Bess, he's
mobbed by a German stage manager and his men.

HOUDINI

Old Kaiser Wilhelm. Did you see him? He
was so white, I thought he was going to
pee in his royal pants. Bess, I'm the
happiest I've ever been in my life.

He takes Bess in a bear hug, squeezing her tight.

HOUDINI

You're still my charm.

BESS

Harry, there's this nightclub where they
have a tango orchestra and singers.

Houdini puts on his robe. He paces, still full of energy.

HOUDINI

But I promised the reporters...

BESS

Charm? I'm just a St. Christopher medal
that's supposed to hang around your neck?

HOUDINI

Bess, wait! I'm sorry.

(CONTINUED)

He laughs.

BESS

Now you're laughing at me?

HOUDINI

No, at myself. I'm conquering Europe and I still can't relax.

Houdini clasps his chest, calls to the German stage manager.

HOUDINI

Franz, Franz!

The German manager rushes over. Houdini wheezes, pained.

GERMAN STAGE MANAGER

Are you sick?

HOUDINI

I've got a terrible heart problem.

GERMAN STAGE MANAGER

Should we call a doctor?

HOUDINI

Only one person in the world can cure me.

Franz looks about him. Sees Bess.

GERMAN STAGE MANAGER

I understand.

HOUDINI

(smiles at Bess)

Tonight I want to be with her.

BESS

And the man behind those eyes? Is he going dancing because he has to, or because he wants to?

Houdini stares at her, takes her hand, closes it in his.

HOUDINI

Because he needs to.

BESS

God help me. I don't know why I can't escape you, Harry Houdini.

HOUDINI

I've hidden the keys. I love you, Bess.

(CONTINUED)

There's a disturbance offstage.

A man waves an envelope.

HOUDINI
What does he want Wally? Autographs?

GIBSON
A telegram from America. It's in German.

BESS
Maybe your mother's taking an earlier crossing, or something?

HOUDINI
Yeah. Can someone help?

GERMAN STAGE MANAGER
(reads, translating)
"MOTHER GRAVELY ILL. STOP. WISHES YOU BY HER. STOP. DON'T DELAY. STOP.

HOUDINI
Whose mother? I said whose mother?

Bess take the telegram, stares at it.

BESS
It's from Theo.

Houdini tries to walk, he looks like a drunk, staggers.

HOUDINI
No... God. No!

Gibson catches him as he falls, headlong.

GIBSON
Get a doctor.

GERMAN STAGE MANAGER
He is joking again, no?

BESS
No.

66 INT: HOUDINI MANSION - NIGHT

66

The grandfather clock pendulum sits frozen. The silence is deafening. This house is even larger and grander.

(CONTINUED)

THEO

I'm sure she's sorry she couldn't hold off her dying so the Great Harry Houdini could expose his vanity to her in front of the nameless citizens of Hungary.

He punches Theo.

HOUDINI

Shuttup!

THEO

I can take any punch you throw, brother. That's in the family.

HOUDINI

I'm sorry. I didn't mean...

THEO

And I'm sorry... for you.

HOUDINI

I just wanted our Momma to be proud of her sons.

THEO

Sons? Did you ever stop to think that she was already proud of you? That she counted on you? I was the one she thought was weak, the lost cause. Momma died asking for her little man.

HOUDINI

She asked for me?

THEO

Irony, isn't it? I was there but she asked for you.

HOUDINI

What did she want?

THEO

I don't know, Harry. She was very weak, it was at the end.

Theo glances at his watch.

THEO

The less-than-great Hardeen has a matinee he's lucky enough to be performing at a workers' club.

(CONTINUED)

He pauses... puts his hand on Houdini's shoulder.

THEO

Ehrich. No matter how many jails you escape from, Momma will still be gone. Just be careful not to shut out those you have left.

Theo exits, leaving Harry to wrestle with his own grief. He stares at his mother's corpse. He touches her cold hand.

HOUDINI

Momma?

Gripping her fingers to his chest, he slumps.

HOUDINI

I've been a good boy.

Eyes brimming he cries. For the first time in his life.

HOUDINI

I've been a good boy.

Bess watches silently at the door.

67 INT: SEANCE ONE - NIGHT

67

A bible is placed on the table.

Heads bow in prayer. Amongst the guests, Bess and Houdini, who shake from emotion. The FEMALE MEDIUM looks upward.

FEMALE MEDIUM ONE

Now, hold your partner's hand.

Hands clasp, forming a human chain. The last lights darken.

FEMALE MEDIUM ONE

In the eyes of God we are now one. Can you hear us? A sign?

An eerie knocking emanates from the table. Guests murmur awe.

68 INT: SEANCE TWO - NIGHT

68

Coins clink as a collection plate passes from hand to hand.

MEDIUM TWO DISCIPLE

It's for the ministry.

A glass bell is placed on the table by FEMALE MEDIUM TWO.

Bess and Houdini sit on either side of the woman.

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI

What did she want?

THEO

I don't know, Harry. She was very weak,
it was at the end.

Theo glances at his watch.

THEO

The less-than-great Hardeen has a matinee
he's lucky enough to be performing at a
workers' club.

He pauses... puts his hand on Houdini's shoulder.

THEO

Ehrich.No matter how many jails you escape
from, Momma will still be gone. Just be
careful not to shut out those you have left.

Theo exits, leaving Harry to wrestle with his own grief. He
stares at his mother's corpse. He touches her cold hand..

HOUDINI

Momma?

Gripping her fingers to his chest, he slumps.

HOUDINI

I've been a good boy.

Eyes brimming he cries. For the first time in his life.

HOUDINI

I've been a good boy.

Bess watches silently at the door.

67

INT: SEANCE - NIGHT

67

A Bible and a glass bell are placed on a table. The
last lights darken.

Heads bow in prayer. Eyes close. Hands clasp,
forming a human chain. Amongst the guests, Bess,
Houdini and Collins.

The FEMALE MEDIUM clasps hands with those closest to
her. The Medium looks upward.

(CONTINUED)

MEDIUM

In the eyes of God we are now one.
Can you hear us?

The bell rings. Guests murmur awe.

MEDIUM

They are with us...

HOUDINI

We seek Cecilia Weiss. Is she
there?

MEDIUM

Give us a sign.

Suddenly, Gibson gasps.

GIBSON

God! Something touched me!

MEDIUM

Yes. She's here with love for you.
Look!

They open their eyes, stare up... a chilling
ectoplasmic wraith appears, floating in the air.
Bess sways back, uncertain. Beside her, Houdini
leans towards the apparition, shaking with emotion.

HOUDINI

Mother.

He stares up at the glowing figure. Suddenly,
Houdini leans forward and pinches the phantom's nose,
there's a scream!

Houdini flicks on the lights and snatches a human
shaped piece of muslin from a black-draped
ASSISTANT's head.

HOUDINI

Mother's looking a little
threadbare.

The Medium confronts Houdini.

MEDIUM

How dare you!

HOUDINI

Me dare...?

(CONTINUED)

BESS

But the bell? You were holding her hands?

Houdini leans over the table, rings the bell with his teeth.

HOUDINI

It's teatime in the promised land.

Gibson touches his face.

GIBSON

...the ghost, I felt it.

Houdini holds his hands behind his back.

HOUDINI

Yes. And here it is again!

Houdini blows gently in his face. Gibson jumps.

GIBSON

Hell. And I almost pooped myself.

Enraged, the Medium stands.

MEDIUM

Who the hell are you?!

HOUDINI

I'm Harry Houdini. I think you'll find that charging people a thousand dollars a head to see a few magic tricks constitutes fraud. I will personally swear out an affidavit.

MEDIUM

(spitting)

I curse you. You're going to die.

HOUDINI

From the minute we're born, we're all gonna die.

MEDIUM

If you had a mother, she must have been more bitch than woman to have whelped you.

Enraged, Houdini smashes the seance table over. The seance props scatter all over the room.

68-74 OMITTED

68-74 *

75 INT: CONAN DOYLE STUDY - 1924 - DAY

75 *

Tea is poured by a servant girl. Houdini and Bess are seated at a table beside a large bluff man with a gray mustache.

HOUDINI

It intrigued me to hear that the writer of Sherlock Holmes, a doctor himself, had scientific proof of an afterlife. So far, those I've encountered making such claims have proven to be either self deluded or worse.

This is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

CONAN DOYLE

I do not believe extraordinary knowledge is easily obtained. Would you object, Mrs. Houdini?

Doyle holds up a cigar.

BESS

Not at all, Sir Arthur.

(CONTINUED)

75 CONTINUED:

CONAN DOYLE (cont'd)
He, like I, believed that death is just a
change of energy.

Doyle holds up a burning match. Blows it out.

CONAN DOYLE
Energy never dies, it just changes states.
We'd have to change the laws of physics to
confound that statement. I've seen
machines that can measure our thoughts.
Our brains spark with electric signals.
And then we die? Where does that energy
go? It must change. Does the soul go with
it? Look how your spirit spoke to me.

Doyle holds up a phone, chuckles.

CONAN DOYLE
Twenty years ago it was unthinkable that
we could talk through the air across the
Atlantic. A human voice skipping from atom
to atom, invisible, unheard. Yet
arriving still intelligible. Who's to say
where the energy of the soul might go?

HOUDINI
I fear I can hardly find my way through
the London fog, let alone a fog of non-
living entities, bantering all around me.

CONAN DOYLE
You make play of my sincerity.

HOUDINI
(warmly)
No, I enjoy your imagination.

CONAN DOYLE
Well, I hope we can provide you with a
little more than just imagination.

A dainty but graceful woman arrives and sits at the table.

CONAN DOYLE
I'd like you to meet my wife.

BESS
Lady Doyle. A pleasure.

LADY DOYLE
Likewise, Mrs. Houdini. Mr. Houdini.

HOUDINI
Please call me Harry.

(CONTINUED)

Houdini extends his hand, she takes it.

LADY DOYLE

There's a definite energy about you.
Perhaps my husband is right. You are a
conduit to the other world and are
unaware of it... A great pain drives you
on your mission?

(Houdini takes his hand away)
What could frighten the great Houdini?

HOUDINI

Perceptive women for one.

LADY DOYLE

Knowledgeable. Most turn to this journey
in search of completion with a loved one.

HOUDINI

I undertook this journey, to contact my
mother. But it's been a bumpy road for
those who would guide me.

LADY DOYLE

I am aware of your exposes. I truly
believe I can help you.

HOUDINI

That would indeed be a miracle.

Lady Doyle studies him, turns to Bess.

LADY DOYLE

Such dark deep eyes. How do you know when
he's telling you the truth?

BESS

I make his life miserable if he isn't.

LADY DOYLE

He needs a match like you.

Lady Doyle reaches her left hand across the table to Houdini.

LADY DOYLE

I would like to help. Your hand please, I
want you to compose a vision in your mind.

Doyle places a paper pad and a pencil in front of his wife.

CONAN DOYLE

Now you're going to see something.

(CONTINUED)

Lady Doyle picks up the pencil, closes her eyes. She slumps awkwardly in her chair. Her throat utters strange soft words. Slowly the pencil circles, compulsively, hypnotically.

CONAN DOYLE
She's going into the ether.

A page fills with random scribble, Doyle tears it aside.

CONAN DOYLE
(excited whisper)
She's breaking through.

The pencil flow is now directed. Harry leans in skeptically. Conan Doyle reads aloud over his wife's shoulder.

CONAN DOYLE
(reading)
It's so dark, is it my Harry, my little one?

HOUDINI
Yes. Who are you?

CONAN DOYLE
(reading)
You look tired. So tired, Harry.

HOUDINI
Who is trying to contact me?

CONAN DOYLE
(reading)
She, who bore you into the physical world.

HOUDINI
Mother?

CONAN DOYLE
(reading)
We are all children here, but in your way
I am your mother.
(he pauses to comment)
They don't see time and space like us. Is
there something you want to ask her?

Harry sits there with a look of uncertainty.

HOUDINI
When I was a little boy, how did you
comfort me when I cried. How did you stop
my tears, Momma?

(CONTINUED)

CONAN DOYLE
(reading)
Have you forgotten, I healed you with my
love. I kissed you Harry.

Houdini breaks touch with Lady Doyle, jolting her from her trance.

LADY DOYLE
(breathing hard)
I lost her.

HOUDINI
I'm sorry this is too difficult.
(standing)
Lady Doyle. I appreciate all that you
have done, it must be very taxing.

76 INT/EXT: CONAN DOYLE HOUSE - ENTRANCE - DAY

76

Houdini haphazardly puts on his coat and hat. Embarrassed,
Bess silently follows suit. Conan Doyle stands, dumbfounded.

HOUDINI
I am at a loss for words. I thank you,
Sir Arthur, for a most unique experience.

Bess and Houdini move to the door. Conan Doyle intercepts.

CONAN DOYLE
You just can't up and leave. Not after
the way you have treated the pioneers of
the science of spiritism. What do you now
think of my wife's abilities?

HOUDINI
I have no wish to embarrass her.

Houdini opens the door. Steps outside and measures his words.

CONAN DOYLE
You mean you don't have the humility to
admit what you've seen?

HOUDINI
You were one of my last hopes, a man who
knows that symptoms define an illness.
The man who created the champion of
deduction. I'm sorry but I'm incredulous
at what you call science.

Houdini opens the door. Steps outside and measures his words.

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI

If that was my mother, a Hungarian who could barely utter a few syllables of English, let alone write a word of it, death must imbue one with the language facilities of a genius linguist.

CONAN DOYLE

They have transcended languages.

HOUDINI

But they do need names. My mother named me Ehrich. Never in her life did she call me Harry. As for my final test, the veracity of that will stay in here.

He touches his chest.

CONAN DOYLE

On the evidence, I doubt you have a heart, sir.

HOUDINI

Please convey to your wife that I do not count her as a deliberate fraud.

CONAN DOYLE

I will convey to my wife that we've spent time with a man who is a lonely, bitter shell of denial. We will pray for you.

Conan Doyle re-enters his home and slams the door. Enraged, Houdini shouts through the letterbox.

HOUDINI

Better a shell of denial than a pompous fool who publicly states he believes in fairies! Good day, sir.

BESS

I'm not stone. I have feelings.

HOUDINI

What?

BESS

You embarrassed me, Harry. They believed they had something to share with you and you treated them like poison.

HOUDINI

Lies are poison. Only when I hear the truth, no matter how painful, will I believe.

(CONTINUED)

BESS

And what is this hallowed test?

He keeps walking. Bess follows.

BESS (cont'd)

Harry, God damn you!

She rushes before him, grabs him.

HOUDINI

My mother never held my hand, never
touched my cheek. She thought affection
would weaken her little man... She never
once kissed me...

BESS

I wish she had.

HOUDINI

Are you saying they're right?

BESS

I don't care. After all these years of
searching and anger I want to know when
does this finish?

HOUDINI

How could you be so stupid!

Houdini puts his hat on. Starts to walk away... freezes. His
back to her. He leans against the wall, gasping for breath.
Bess hurries to him. His face is anguish, tears stream.

HOUDINI

I'm never going to find her am I?

He reaches to Bess.

BESS

You have to let her go, Harry.

HOUDINI

I don't know how. I'm sorry...

Bess cradles him.

BESS

Hush... hush.

77 INT: NEW YORK THEATER - STAGE - NIGHT

77

His eyes haggard. Too much grease paint.

(CONTINUED)

77 CONTINUED:

Harry slams his fist into a brick wall. Stomps onto a carpet.

HOUDINI

Solid as rock! And no trap doors!

He claps his hands. Screens are erected around the eight foot high brick wall. Behind the screens, Houdini waves to the audience as he walks toward the wall.

HOUDINI

Here I go! I dematerialize...

Above the screen his hand vanishes from view at the wall's edge. Almost instantly appearing on the other side. As if he'd passed right through.

HOUDINI

... And. Here I am!

The audience gasps. Bess smiles from the stage.

Harry ignores the applause and just walks off. Bess follows.

HOUDINI

I can't just do empty tricks... I have to tell the truth.

78 INT: VAST THEATER - NIGHT

78

Houdini strides onto the glowing, mist-filled stage. He is surrounded by seance tables and strange psychic devices.

HOUDINI

There are those who'd have you believe that they are gods. Who have a direct antenna to the "True Magic" of the universe... That they can read minds, foresee the future, heal wounds, talk to the dead!

He lifts a spirit trumpet, speaks through it... the effect is eerie

HOUDINI

Ha... talk to the dead. I've met hundreds of them. Table tappers, trumpet blowers, trance freaks and ectoplasmic saints!

He produces a glowing spirit hand... the five fingered apparition dances in the air like a demented bird.

HOUDINI

They'd rather we exercise our fantasies than our brains.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI (cont'd)
I've invested years attempting to reach
across the psychic gulf...

He reveals threads tied to the hand, makes it dance like a puppet.

HOUDINI
...You think I wouldn't if I could?

Feet astride the footlights, he addresses the unseen audience.

HOUDINI
I ache to believe... I wanted to speak to
one single soul. How difficult could that
be? July the sixteenth, nineteen
thirteen, she died with a thought on her
lips... for me. There are twenty thousand
mediums practicing today and none have
spoken those words.

His empty hands suddenly fill with fanned dollar bills.

HOUDINI
And I'll warrant for my ten thousand
dollar reward, two thirds of them tried.

The money flies from his fingers. Bursts aflame before falling.

HOUDINI
If spirits are genuine, you think they'd
warn us. There'd have been no passengers
on the Titanic, no deaths in the San
Francisco earthquake.

His words torrent in anger, spittle flies.

HOUDINI
If ghosts can inhabit any self proclaimed
Madame Zaza... Why not the lower forms of
life? Why doesn't your poodle whisper
warnings about the next train wreck? Or
your Persian, forewarn a murder? Why?...
Animals don't have bank accounts.

He materializes a newspaper... tosses it aside

HOUDINI
A student in love with a lost spirit
killed herself to join her dead lover.

He materializes another, with banner headlines.

HOUDINI

A man shot his children because his dead wife sent him a message that she wanted them with her.

A pulse beat. Houdini remains alone in a spotlight.

HOUDINI

You know what the lowest form of life is?
(a hissed whisper)
The medium!

79 INT: HOUDINI MANSION - LOFT - 1926 - NIGHT

79

Surrounded by a jumble of magic and escape paraphernalia. Houdini, in his fifties, graying, worn, slumps in the electric chair typing. Martin Beck knocks and enters.

BECK

(sweating)

Harry! I was on my way home. I thought I'd drop by.

HOUDINI

You never drop anywhere.

BECK

Look, this lawsuit thing, it's...

HOUDINI

I'll speak my mind in the press until every spiritualist fraud and fake crawls back under whatever slimy rocks they crawled out from.

Beck opens his briefcase. Waves court papers.

BECK

Libel, 110,000 there, Libel 50,000 here, oh here's one for only 10,000. You obviously didn't annoy him enough.

HOUDINI

Let them sue me or haunt me, I'll stand on the truth.

BECK

Lose half of these, after what you've "invested" making movies and you'll stand in the poor house. We're old friends, friends help each other.

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI

I didn't want him to see you like this.

BESS

I'm just relaxing.

He finds a mickey in her purse.

HOUDINI

Damn bootleggers.

He pours the contents into a plant.

BESS

That'll steady it's nerves.

HOUDINI

I think you're just tired, Bessie.

BESS

I can't do it anymore, Harry. I can't stand wearing wrinkled clothes that stink of mothballs. I can't go into another hotel bathroom and look at myself in the mirror and say this isn't my home. I can't sleep in a bed that a thousand people have slept in and it doesn't care. Just the thought of one more train and my body shakes and my stomach wants to spit out my whole life. My body's fighting me. Maybe you think I'm a woman and I'm weak, but I've stood beside you through everything. **I had dreams too. Now I just want you to stay home and hold me.**

*
*
*

She looks childlike.

HOUDINI

We need the money, Bess.

BESS

That's not why. You can't stop. I could applaud you until my hands bled. You want their hands. I loved Ehrich Weiss, I used to put up with Harry Houdini... I don't know who you are anymore, some man that worships **another** woman...

*

*

There's a large photograph of Houdini's Mother in a black mourning frame on the mantle.

(CONTINUED)

BESS (cont'd)
She doesn't drink, she's a blessed saint.
She's dead and I can't compete.

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI

We need the money, Bess.

BESS

I could applaud you until my hands bled. You want their hands. I loved Ehrich Weiss, I used to put up with Harry Houdini... I don't know who you are anymore, some man that worships the perfect woman... She doesn't drink, she's a goddamn saint. She's dead and I can't compete.

HOUDINI

Leave her out of this. Show some spine.

She throws her wedding ring at him.

BESS

Believe? I believe, your mother was all spine!

She storms away. The ring rolls and falls, circling.

80 INT: WESTINGHOUSE RADIO STUDIO - WINGS - NIGHT

80

Bess sits beside Theo in the theater wings, waiting.

THEO

You're awful quiet, Bess.

BESS

This is the last time, Theo.

Theo takes a deep breath, reacting to the distant thunder.

THEO

Ahh... a thunderstorm on Halloween.
Harry would've loved it.

Bess nods. Suddenly, a voice crackles on the talk-back.

TECHNICIAN (V.O.)

Okay, we're back on the air.

81 INT: WESTINGHOUSE RADIO STUDIO - STAGE - NIGHT

81

Each of them has taken their seat again.

BLACKBURN

Well, please forgive our little interruption. It seems the devils are indeed frolicking this Hallow's Eve.

Bess leans forward.

(CONTINUED)

81 CONTINUED:

BESS
Before we start... I didn't realize... I
do have a memento from Harry.

Face determined, she pulls the wedding band from her finger.

BESS
I swore I'd never take this off again.
But tonight I'm prepared to do whatever I
have to.

As she hands it to Esther, the ring slips through the
Medium's fingers. Falls onto the table.

In slow motion, the gold band spirals on the table's surface.

82 INT: VAST THEATER - NIGHT

82

Houdini is wrenched from his thoughts. The sound of the
spinning wedding ring reverberates all around him. He turns.

Surprised, he searches for the source of the noise.

The dark orchestra pit's empty.

The theater seats are draped in dust covers.

Houdini spins again, disoriented. He's been in the same
theater as the seance the entire time.

Across the stage... dim lights flicker and dance in the
velvet blackness... candle flames.

The image of the seance table continues to materialize before
him, fluttering in a dark translucence.

He stops, transfixed, hardly daring to believe his eyes as
the scene slowly takes form.

ESTHER
Mrs. Houdini, please hold my hand...

HOUDINI
Bess...?

Houdini, moves past the orchestra pit.

HOUDINI
Bess!

The dark shadowy group at the table is oblivious.

(CONTINUED)

ESTHER

I sense so much of him in you...

HOUDINI

THEO! BESS!

He's stopped. As if an invisible membrane stops his progress.

HOUDINI

Aghh!!! Is this madness...?

Anguished, he pushes. He's like a fly in an invisible web.

83 INT: MONTREAL THEATER - STAGE - NIGHT 83

Houdini grimaces in pain. Metal links entwine his wrists.

A padlock snaps into place.

HOUDINI

As tight as you dare.

Gibson stands sentinel as the Executioner. Four Montreal students in football attire bind Houdini in chains.

HOUDINI

My pain... your pleasure...

Super: MONTREAL - OCTOBER 1926

Houdini captivates the audience, with his speedy patter.

HOUDINI

The thing that fascinates about the human animal, the roller coaster, the speeding car! We experience our greatest thrill, when we are closest to our own oblivion.

The students diligently bind his legs. Houdini grins.

HOUDINI

Is that the best you can do in Montreal?

They yank the chains tighter. Houdini's eyes sweep the crowd.

HOUDINI

I've developed a body that's trained to the infinite, an instrument of amazement.

Ominous, behind him, a backdrop with demon eyes stares down.

The young students in their football gear laugh and point.

STUDENT ONE

Hey! He's in here!

*

Collins returns to writing. Hardly notices the back-stagers.

STUDENT TWO (O.C.)

That was some show, old man!

*

STUDENT ONE (O.C.)

He figures he's pretty tough.

*

Don't you?

*

(CONTINUED)

COLLINS

(filtered)

He's been running a fever of over a hundred, since Montreal, I can't get him near a doctor and after today, if you want a husband, you better get here.

BESS

What do you mean?

86 INT: TORONTO HOTEL LOBBY - DAY

86

Collins checks to see he's not overheard. In the background, Houdini signs autographs.

COLLINS

He had himself buried alive for the Toronto papers. Nearly pulled it off, too. Six feet under, the coffin caved in. Somehow he clawed his way up. His ankle's swollen, he's not in good shape, Bess. Why would anyone want to bury himself alive?

BESS

Ask his mother.

COLLINS

For Detroit he's dropped the milk can. He's ordered us to bring in the Chinese torture tank. Just looking at that thing bites into my gut.

BESS

And you think he'd listen to me?

COLLINS

He wears your ring as a good luck charm on a chain around his neck. He won't perform without it.

HOUDINI

(clapping his hands)

Let's go, **Jim!**

*

87 INT: DETROIT THEATER - NIGHT

87

Houdini claps, a curtain rises, revealing the torture chamber.

HOUDINI

Good people of our Motor City, tonight you will see me face my ultimate challenge.

(CONTINUED)

POLICE OFFICER
You couldn't pay me a million to go in that.

A voice calls from the wings.

BESS
Harry?

HOUDINI
I will be deprived of air, imprisoned in
iron and water, a death sentence...

She comes on stage.

BESS
Harry?

HOUDINI
Hold it, hold it. There's my Queen of mystery,
my dearest inspiration, my wife, Bess.

The audience claps, uncertain. Gibson pulls off his mask.
Bess moves to Houdini, touches his forehead.

BESS
I've come to bring you home, Harry.

Her eyes are pleading with him.

BESS
Please, Harry. Don't do this tonight.

HOUDINI
This is the last time. The last.

BESS
No, you're sick.

HOUDINI
They came to see me.

BESS
Harry, I'm begging you.

Bess grabs his arm, whispers, trying to persuade him to stop.

HOUDINI
(to the audience)
Let me share one secret with you. My wife
Bess Houdini. She doesn't like me
performing this act. But she's here
beside me. I'm a lucky man.
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI (cont'd)
(he smiles to Bess)
Gentlemen, please help me into the tank.

The audience applauds. Harry rises, strung upside down by his heels, above the tank. In pain, he stares at Bess, hypnotizing the audience with her fear.

HOUDINI
The last face I want to see.

Bess is uncertain. They kiss.

HOUDINI
I love you. Reset the clock, please.
(Gibson falters)
The clock!

Gibson runs to it. Restarts it.

HOUDINI
WAIT!!!!

Everyone turns.

HOUDINI
Bess, Bess.

She moves to him.

HOUDINI
Around my neck. Wear it for me.

BESS
The last time. Promise, Harry.

Uncertain, Bess snaps the chain. Puts the ring on her finger.

HOUDINI
NOW!!!!

Houdini is plunged down into the tank. Water sloshes. The lid is slammed down, then padlocked. The committee slides four large screens around the giant tank.

A spotlight shines onto the translucent clock. It's massive shadow image looms over the stage as the executioner, Gibson, chants out the times. Bess paces, nervous, watching.

GIBSON
Forty five seconds!

A strange clanking comes from inside the chamber. Bess runs to Gibson, pointing at the sound behind the screens.

(CONTINUED)

GIBSON (CONT'D)
I think he's added it to the act.

BESS
Something's wrong!

Bess runs toward the screens. Gibson holds her back.

She wrestles free and pulls over the screens.

The chamber rocks in place.

Behind the glass, underwater. Flesh bleached. Houdini's hair waves strangely as he rocks, trying to escape. Desperate... His mouth opens to scream... Bubbles and blood lunge forth.

Bess grabs the ax from a stunned Gibson. She smashes at the glass. Again! And Again!

Bloody water vomits outward. The clock ticks...

88 INT: DETROIT HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

88

The clock continues like a pulse... Houdini's eyes open. Incredibly weak, he fights to speak.

HOUDINI
Where am I?

Bess moves forward. Gibson watches withdrawn.

BESS
Grace Hospital.

HOUDINI
(hoarse, breathy)
Catholic? I don't trust Catholics. They think they've got somewhere to go. Don't you, Bess?

A harried doctor takes his pulse.

HOUDINI
Book me into a hotel with room service.
(Houdini moves, cries pain)
Ahh... I hurt everywhere.

DOCTOR
I don't think you're quite ready.

HOUDINI
Bess, this guy... looks too young to be a doctor. What's the score?

(CONTINUED)

DOCTOR
You've had appendicitis, for sometime by
the look of you, and tonight it ruptured.

HOUDINI
So did he patch me up?

BESS
They did a great job.

He studies Bess' face.

HOUDINI
You couldn't play poker to save your life.

BESS
You left it pretty late, Harry.

Weak, Houdini eyes the doctor. He knows.

HOUDINI
In a hospital? What will people think?

BESS
Rest, Harry, please.

HOUDINI
(chuckles darkly)
At 52? Like a pack of cards. Do you
suppose they'll even remember me?

BESS
Rest... you must.

HOUDINI
Paper, Wally... We must make it official.
Gibson searches quickly, finds a scrap of paper.

GIBSON
Here.

HOUDINI
The back of an envelope? How fitting.

GIBSON
Don't know what to write, Harry?

HOUDINI
"I swear to my wife, if it is possible
for any man to escape from death, I,
Harry Houdini, will be that man."

(CONTINUED)

Gibson helps Harry sign the note.

HOUDINI
Witness it, Wally.

GIBSON
In blood?

HOUDINI
No, I already did that.

BESS
Goddamn you, Harry, stop making jokes.

Houdini signals Bess closer.

HOUDINI
We need a sign... So you'll know it's me.
He whispers in her ear.

HOUDINI
Yours are the only lips I've ever kissed.
He kisses her lips.

HOUDINI (cont'd)
No tears, no fears, Bess.

BESS
Save your strength.

Houdini slumps as he reaches out.

HOUDINI
Damn me... I'm too tired to fight this.
The clock tick speeds, louder, crazy.

BESS
You can, you must.

The pulse stops, so suddenly its absence hurts.

BESS
Harry... don't leave me... Harry.

89 INT: WESTINGHOUSE RADIO STUDIO - STAGE - NIGHT

89

Immediately we hear a cry of anguish from Esther.

Esther is in a trance, her head convulses back and forth. The seance group watch nervously.

(CONTINUED)

THEO

She was in terrible pain, she barely whispered...

HOUDINI

What?

THEO

"I tried to make him strong. Ask Ehrich to forgive me."

Braggadocio long spent. Houdini stands almost impassive.

BESS

Why didn't you tell him?

THEO

All my life he came first in everything.

BESS

You knew what he was looking for?

THEO

I loved him, Bess, more than he let me. But I hated him at the same time. She was my mother too. And when she was dying, she didn't have a single word for me.

BESS

I'm sorry.

THEO

I thought if I came here, I could in some way, make up for what I did.

Overcome with guilt, Theo exits. Bess stands trembling.

ANOTHER ANGLE:

Shocked, Houdini sees Bess is crushed. Collins steps forward and softly takes her arm.

COLLINS

Come on, old girl. Drive you home.

BESS

Oh, Jim.

He hands her his handkerchief as they walk through the studio door. Blackburn sits alone in the studio. A voice comes on the P.A.

(CONTINUED)

ESTHER

He's raw, so powerful. He hurts to be close... he's so desperate, anguish... he doesn't know how to use me.

BLACKBURN

Help him, Esther.

ESTHER

He doesn't know the way.

GIBSON

What did you expect?

BESS

Shut up!

Houdini stands willing himself into the medium.

ESTHER

I feel his urges, not his words... he aches to tell the world he still exists... he knows you are here.

BESS

God... Yes.

Houdini gasps. Overjoyed.

BLACKBURN

Can you get any kind of message?

ESTHER

A deep emptiness, even he doesn't understand... the word's are confusing... wait... he searched for one woman.

BESS

Who?

ESTHER

His mother.

HOUDINI

How can she tell?

THEO

What about our mother?

ESTHER

She died, but he couldn't find her.

Houdini collapses against the table.

(CONTINUED)

ESTHER

It was his greatest loss.

BESS

What proof do you have?

ESTHER

There's nothing but a child in him. He cries inside and no one holds him.

The entire table is mesmerized.

ESTHER

He fights to be strong... and her last words, the ones he longed to hear... were never spoken.

Bess starts to cry.

ESTHER

And... she never once kissed him.

GIBSON

It's gibberish.

HOUDINI

She feels me.

BESS

It is Harry.

Bess lights up. Her face girlish, joyous.

BESS

He turned to the spirit world... and when they couldn't give her back, he turned against them.

BLACKBURN

What do you think, Mrs. Houdini?

BESS

Somehow. Harry is here. I know he is.

BLACKBURN

Tonight, on All Hallow's Eve, Ray Blackburn has brought you a miracle.

THEO

I don't think so.

Theo gets up from his chair and goes over to Bess. He gently puts his hand on the elated woman's shoulder.

(CONTINUED)

BESS

Harry kept his promise.

THEO

Bess, forgive me. I had to be sure something wonderful wasn't going to happen before...

BESS

What are you saying?

Theo reaches in his pocket and pulls out a metal instrument. He directs a question to Esther.

THEO

Do you know what this is?

ESTHER

No.

THEO

It's a lock pick.

ESTHER

Oh yes, thieves use them.

THEO

And magicians.

(he turns to the others)

I guess I learned my brother's way with locks and disguises, if nothing else.

From his coat pocket he pulls a sheaf of papers.

THEO

When I visited your offices for the bereaved. I found file upon file, newspaper clippings, obituaries, about the people you gives readings to. And I found this.

(he shows a thick envelope)

Our so called psychic has had private detectives following you, Bess. They probably spent months on you.

Houdini raises his eyes upward. Claps his hands, wryly.

HOUDINI

A good one, God! I didn't see that coming.

ESTHER

He's a liar.

(CONTINUED)

Bess grabs the sheaf.

BESS

(reading)

...a theater bar on 42nd Avenue... drank heavily... September eighteenth, same bar, expressed interest in her husband...

THEO

Bess, don't.

BESS

...she seemed desperate for company...

She throws the report down.

BESS

I thought he was a friend of Harry's.

ESTHER

I have nothing to gain. I already swore I would take no money.

THEO

But you would have, from the people you'd have exploited thanks to your defamation of Harry. But you're not the only guilty party. I met the detective who wrote this. He's prepared to swear he was paid by Mr. Blackburn, as I presume were you.

Blackburn signals to cut the show. He grins darkly at Theo.

BLACKBURN

Ladies and gentleman, I see our time is up. I promised you an unusual show and Ray Blackburn has delivered.

Bess stands and points at the control booth engineer.

BESS

Wait! WAIT! I want to be heard.

Bess, fighting tears, unleashes her anger on Blackburn.

BESS

If it's pain you wanted, Ray Blackburn, then you've exploited mine. If it's morbid fascination for your audience, then I hope this has been morbid enough.

Houdini watches in shocked awe.

(CONTINUED)

BESS

I'll not give you the satisfaction of my anger, just my pity. On this stage... You haven't damaged Harry Houdini, you only proved his greatness. Where you're cruel, he gave wonder. Where you used my hopes to trick me, he used his deceptions to give enchantment.

Bess glances at Theo and steels herself.

BESS

I've been waiting for ten years with the slimmest of hope. I now accept that there's no chance to complete myself with his presence. I swear to Harry, from today I'll face my adversities with the strength of his memory. Harry, no matter what our flaws, no matter what mistakes we made. My life was deeply better for knowing you. Wherever you are, no matter what happened to us... I still love you.

Houdini stands spellbound, staring at Bess.

BLACKBURN

(to the booth)

Take us off the air!

The show's theme music plays. The studio lights go up. They're off the air. Gibson stands threateningly.

GIBSON

(to Esther)

If you were a man, I'd hit you.

(he turns to Blackburn)

The same goes for you.

Bess takes her purse, turns to leave. Theo touches her arm.

THEO

Bess! There's one more thing. I should've told Harry this a long time ago.

BESS

I think I've had about all I can handle tonight, Theo.

THEO

I have to, please. When our mother died... She had me reading all of the old clippings Harry'd sent her.

(CONTINUED)

BESS

Theo.

THEO

She was in terrible pain, she barely
whispered...

HOUDINI

What?

THEO

"I tried to make him strong. Ask Ehrich
to forgive me."

Braggadocio long spent. Houdini stands almost impassive.

BESS

Why didn't you tell him?

THEO

All my life he came first in everything.

BESS

You knew what he was looking for?

THEO

I loved him, Bess, more than he let me.
But I hated him at the same time. She was
my mother too. And when she was dying,
she didn't have a single word for me.

BESS

I'm sorry.

THEO

I thought if I came here, I could in some
way, make up for what I did.

Overcome with guilt, Theo exits. Bess stands trembling.

ANOTHER ANGLE:

Shocked, Houdini sees Bess is crushed.

Gibson steps forward and softly takes her arm.

GIBSON

Come on, old girl. Drive you home.

BESS

Oh, Walter.

He hands her his handkerchief as they walk through the studio door

(CONTINUED)

Blackburn sits alone in the studio. A voice comes on the P.A.

TECHNICIAN (O.C.)

Hey Ray, switchboard's lit up like a Christmas tree.

BLACKBURN

Wow, that's great.

TECHNICIAN (O.C.)

That lightning. Apparently we never got our signal out again.

BLACKBURN

Aw shit.

ANOTHER ANGLE:

The only motion left on stage is the studio clock ticking. The lights flicker out, Houdini stares alone in the darkness.

HOUDINI

I should be laughing?

Distant thunder rumbles.

HOUDINI

Is this purgatory?

He looks at his hands, they tremble.

HOUDINI

How could I be so blind? She was always there... What I'd have given to touch her.

He looks up.

HOUDINI

Heads or tails, I lose, right?

Houdini slumps at the seance table. A dim light glows inward. The old usher opens the door, a small figure is silhouetted.

USHER

No one's cleaned up yet, Ma'am.

Bess re-enters the studio, alone.

BESS

I swore I'd never lose it again.

She goes over to the table, searches, picks up her ring. She sits in a chair, stares at the gold band, puts it on.

(CONTINUED)

She starts to cry. She opens her handbag, pulls out a compact, looks at her eyes and dabs her face.

BESS
(to herself)
Oh, Harry.

Houdini is sitting across from her.

HOUDINI
I'm here.

Bess doesn't react.

HOUDINI
Bess...

She slowly looks up, looks right through him.

HOUDINI
I'm here, Bessie.

Standing, she looks like she hears. Shakes her head.

HOUDINI
It's Harry.

Bess moves to the stage door, turns the handle. Houdini's devastated. Lost.

HOUDINI
What's written in our ring?

She opens the door and starts to leave.

HOUDINI
Believe...

Bess stops in the doorway, frozen for an instant.

BESS
(whisper)
I daren't.

HOUDINI
Believe.

BESS
I'm going mad.

She looks at the band on her finger.

BESS
I'm scared.

(CONTINUED)

HOUDINI
I'm scared too.

BESS
Oh, Harry.

He gets up and walks towards her. She can see him.

BESS (cont'd)
Is this because I'm so weak?

HOUDINI
Or, so strong.

They stare at each other. Now almost too afraid to speak.

HOUDINI
It doesn't matter if I'm a dream, a joke,
a character in your mind. Believe...

BESS
Harry... It's really you?

He smiles awkwardly, raises his hands. They are shaking.

HOUDINI
I don't know what I'm feeling, but I
don't want it to stop.

Bess reaches out, touches his hands.

HOUDINI
I didn't escape, Bess. You found me.

They embrace, scared, awed, love sweeps them.

HOUDINI
Oh my Bess.

Alone on the vast stage they kiss.

HOUDINI (cont'd)
I can't come with you... Or give you
anything to take. Except my love and
what's written inside our ring.

BESS
It's enough Harry. More than enough.

She leans into the comfort of his body. Gently they sway as
Harry leads Bess in a gentle dance to their own inner music.

FADE TO BLACK.

HOUDINI

It doesn't matter if I'm a dream, a joke,
a character in your mind. Believe...

He smiles awkwardly, raises his hands. They are shaking.

BESS

I don't know what I'm feeling, but I
don't want it to stop.

Bess reaches out, touches his hands.

HOUDINI

I didn't escape, Bess. You found me. I
searched my whole life to find the
magic I had right in front of me.

*
*
*

They embrace, scared, awed, love sweeps them.

Alone on the vast stage they kiss.

HOUDINI (cont'd)

I can't come with you... Or give you
anything to take. Except my love and
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FADE TO BLACK.

THE END