

# ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS





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## Episode #389

### Harry Houdini | The Master of Escape

#### 1st Aug, 2023

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## **Transcript**

[00:00:04] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:20] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are going to be talking about a man called Harry Houdini, The Master of Escape.

[00:00:29] He was, by many people's standards, the most [daring](#)<sup>1</sup> magician in the world, and invented modern magic.

[00:00:37] And his story is fascinating. It involves magic, underwater escapes, elephants, locks, [a keen eye](#)<sup>2</sup> for publicity, a [crusade](#)<sup>3</sup> against [spiritualism](#)<sup>4</sup> and more.

[00:00:51] So, let's not waste a minute, and get right into the story of Harry Houdini.

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<sup>1</sup> brave or bold

<sup>2</sup> ability to notice and find things

<sup>3</sup> a campaign or a passionate movement for a cause

<sup>4</sup> belief in communication with the spirits of the dead

[00:01:00] On January 7th, 1918, at the Hippodrome theatre in New York City, the audience [waited with bated breath](#)<sup>5</sup>.

[00:01:10] On stage stood a short, [stocky](#)<sup>6</sup> man wearing a formal black suit.

[00:01:17] Behind him was a wooden box, a box that he had told his audience was eight feet square, less than one metre squared.

[00:01:28] The box was raised off the ground, with a [ramp](#)<sup>7</sup> leading up to it, so the audience could see that there were no hidden doors below.

[00:01:37] And next to him was Jennie. Jennie was not his [petite](#)<sup>8</sup> assistant. She was a five-tonne elephant almost two and a half metres tall.

[00:01:52] The man had proudly declared that he could make the elephant disappear [into thin air](#)<sup>9</sup>, [vanish](#)<sup>10</sup> from sight.

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<sup>5</sup> waited anxiously or in suspense

<sup>6</sup> wide and strong-looking

<sup>7</sup> inclined or sloping surface joining two different levels

<sup>8</sup> small and dainty or delicate

<sup>9</sup> completely and mysteriously

<sup>10</sup> disappear suddenly or completely

[00:02:01] The man reached into a bag, taking out blocks of sugar and feeding them to the elephant, leading her up the [ramp](#) into the box.

[00:02:12] After several minutes, he had succeeded at [coaxing](#)<sup>11</sup> the elephant inside the box. The man [slammed](#)<sup>12</sup> the door behind him, and a group of 30 strong men [spun](#)<sup>13</sup> the box around, turning it on itself.

[00:02:29] Several minutes went by, and then the door was opened. The [anxious](#)<sup>14</sup> audience looked inside. The elephant was gone, it had [vanished](#)<sup>15</sup> [into thin air](#).

[00:02:43] And to this very day, nobody knows for sure what happened, but keep listening until the very end of the episode and I'll tell you some of the theories about how he did it.

[00:02:56] The man's name was, of course, Harry Houdini, the father of modern magic, the Master of Escape, and by many people's standards the most impressive magician in the world.

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<sup>11</sup> persuading or gently encouraging

<sup>12</sup> closed forcefully and with a loud noise

<sup>13</sup> turned or rotated quickly

<sup>14</sup> feeling worried or uneasy

<sup>15</sup> disappeared suddenly or completely

[00:03:08] But Houdini, as you'll learn, was much more than just a magician.

[00:03:14] He was born in modern day Hungary, in 1874, but his parents came to America when the young Harry was only four years old.

[00:03:24] I should say his real name wasn't actually "Harry", it wasn't even "Houdini" - this was a stage name, a name that he gave himself after the famous French magician, Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, someone who Houdini would [model himself on](#)<sup>16</sup>.

[00:03:42] I'll continue to call him Houdini or Harry, [for sake of ease](#)<sup>17</sup>, but he was born Erich Weisz, with his parents changing his name to the more American-sounding "Erik Weiss" shortly after arriving in the United States.

[00:03:58] When he was growing up, his family was very poor, and the young Houdini was forced to work to help put food on the table. And from an early age, he showed an interest and talent for performing - first circus tricks and [acrobatics](#)<sup>18</sup>, and then basic magic tricks.

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<sup>16</sup> imitate or take inspiration from

<sup>17</sup> for the purpose of convenience

<sup>18</sup> gymnastic or athletic moves or performances

[00:04:19] He was also incredibly athletic, and **excelled**<sup>19</sup> at sports. Given the physical nature of many of his tricks, and the strength that was required to complete them, this would be something that would come in very useful later on.

[00:04:38] His career as a performer started when he was a **mere**<sup>20</sup> nine years old, when he did **trapeze**<sup>21</sup> tricks, circus tricks, and when he was a teenager he would go on to perform magic tricks with playing cards, **teaming up**<sup>22</sup> with his brother Theodore to form “The Brothers Houdini”.

[00:04:56] By all accounts, he was a **half-decent**<sup>23</sup> card magician, and could do some quite impressive magic tricks, but he was far from great. What’s more, these jobs paid terribly, and he would hardly make enough money to survive.

[00:05:15] While he was working as a magician with his brother, the pair met a young woman called Bess. It was Theodore who **initially**<sup>24</sup> showed interest in Bess, and the

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<sup>19</sup> performed exceptionally well

<sup>20</sup> simply or just

<sup>21</sup> horizontal bar hanging by two ropes in the air used in acrobatics

<sup>22</sup> joining together as a team

<sup>23</sup> moderately good or acceptable

<sup>24</sup> at first or in the beginning

pair were romantically involved for a while, but it didn't take long for Bess's attentions to switch to Erik, or rather, Harry Houdini.

[00:05:38] Not only did she fall in love with Houdini, with the pair marrying in 1894, but she also replaced his brother as Houdini's assistant. "The Brothers Houdini" were no longer; they were replaced by simply "The Houdinis", an act consisting of Harry Houdini and his new wife, Bess.

[00:05:59] The pair would continue their tour of low-budget shows, and it wouldn't be until five years later, in 1899, that they got their [big break](#)<sup>25</sup>.

[00:06:11] A theatre manager had heard about one of Houdini's new tricks, where he escaped from [handcuffs](#)<sup>26</sup>, and told him that he could offer him a long and reasonably well-paid contract.

[00:06:23] Houdini took the job, and before long he was one of the most [in-demand](#)<sup>27</sup> magicians in the country.

[00:06:31] So, what tricks did he actually do, and why was he so successful?

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<sup>25</sup> significant opportunity or chance for success

<sup>26</sup> metal rings placed around the wrists to prevent movement

<sup>27</sup> highly sought after or requested



[00:06:37] At this point, his [signature trick](#)<sup>28</sup> involved [handcuffs](#), the metal lockable rings that are placed around the wrists of suspected criminals to prevent them from moving their arms.

[00:06:50] Someone would place [handcuffs](#) on Houdini, and he would magically escape from the [handcuffs](#).

[00:06:58] This is at a very basic level, and was not in itself unique. There were other magicians who could do this, normally by using fake or adapted [handcuffs](#) that made removing them easy, or by not properly locking them, or [all manner of](#)<sup>29</sup> tricks.

[00:07:17] Houdini's genius was to turn the entire escape into a spectacle, a public performance that really involved the audience.

[00:07:28] Instead of coming on stage and escaping from a pair of [handcuffs](#) that he had brought with him, he would encourage the audience to bring their own [handcuffs](#) and their own locks, which he would then escape from. Not only did this make the tricks, the [stunts](#)<sup>30</sup>, all the more real, but it [encouraged](#)<sup>31</sup> people to come to the shows because they would want to test him with their own locks.

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<sup>28</sup> a distinctive or characteristic magic trick

<sup>29</sup> various types or kinds of

<sup>30</sup> daring or impressive performances

<sup>31</sup> motivated or inspired

[00:07:55] When his tour arrived at a new town he would proudly challenge the local police, saying that he would give \$100 to anyone who could produce a pair of [handcuffs](#) that Houdini could not escape from.

[00:08:10] His [fame](#)<sup>32</sup> continued to grow, with people [flocking](#)<sup>33</sup> to his shows to see how he could escape from...seemingly anything.

[00:08:20] His first big public test would come in 1904, when the British newspaper The Daily Mirror had arranged a special series of shows for him in London's Hippodrome.

[00:08:33] As per usual, people had brought their own locks and [handcuffs](#) to the shows, and Houdini had escaped from all of them without major problems.

[00:08:43] But then it came time for the main event.

[00:08:48] In preparation for the event, the newspaper had [commissioned](#)<sup>34</sup> a special pair of [handcuffs](#) to be made by a lockmaker. These [handcuffs](#), so The Daily Mirror reported, had taken five years to make, and would be impossible to escape from.

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<sup>32</sup> recognition and reputation

<sup>33</sup> gathering or coming together in large numbers

<sup>34</sup> requested or ordered the creation of

[00:09:05] Or to quote the maker of the [handcuffs](#), no [mortal](#)<sup>35</sup> man could escape from them.

[00:09:12] But was Harry Houdini a normal “[mortal](#)” man? That was the question...

[00:09:19] Houdini was led on stage and shown the [handcuffs](#).

[00:09:24] [Ever the](#)<sup>36</sup> showman, he refused to attempt the trick not once, not twice, but three times, saying it was impossible. On the fourth time he agreed to try, telling the audience “I do not know whether I am going to get out or not. But I can assure you I am going to try my best.”

[00:09:45] He was put in the [handcuffs](#), the lock [fastened](#)<sup>37</sup> and the 15 centimetre key removed. He retreated into a small box, which he called his “ghost house”, to try to escape from the [cuffs](#)<sup>38</sup>.

[00:10:00] The band started playing, the clock ticking.

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<sup>35</sup> living human being

<sup>36</sup> always being or behaving like

<sup>37</sup> securely attached or closed

<sup>38</sup> shortened form of "handcuffs"

[00:10:05] Minutes went by, with no sign of Houdini. Twenty two minutes later his face **popped out**<sup>39</sup>, but the **cuffs** were still on. He needed to take a better look at them, he said, so he held them up to the light.

[00:10:20] After thirty five minutes he emerged again, covered in **sweat**<sup>40</sup> and visibly in distress, but only to complain that his knees were **sore**<sup>41</sup>, and could he have a **cushion**<sup>42</sup> to kneel on.

[00:10:34] Shortly after he called out again to ask for the **cuffs** to be removed so that Houdini could take off his jacket. He was getting hot and uncomfortable, and he was wearing a large formal jacket.

[00:10:48] The organisers refused, saying that removing the **cuffs** might give Houdini an idea about how to escape.

[00:10:57] Houdini then theatrically **whipped out**<sup>43</sup> a knife from his pocket and proceeded to cut the jacket off. The crowd went wild, and Houdini went back into the box, only to emerge a few minutes later, free.

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<sup>39</sup> emerged or appeared suddenly

<sup>40</sup> perspiration or moisture produced by the body

<sup>41</sup> in pain or uncomfortable

<sup>42</sup> a soft object used for support or comfort

<sup>43</sup> quickly and suddenly took out or displayed

[00:11:15] He burst into tears, telling the crowd “I must say it was one of the hardest, but at the same time one of the fairest, tests I ever had.”

[00:11:25] How did he do it, you might ask? Well, to this day, again, nobody knows for sure.

[00:11:32] There is the theory that somebody [slipped](#)<sup>44</sup> him the key, but it was custom made, a reported 15 centimetres long, so it’s not exactly the kind of thing that he could have kept hidden in his hair or in his mouth.

[00:11:48] There’s also a theory that the entire [stunt](#)<sup>45</sup> was pre-arranged, it was a fake [stunt](#), organised and [orchestrated](#)<sup>46</sup> by Houdini [in conjunction with](#)<sup>47</sup> The Daily Mirror, so either it was a [set-up](#)<sup>48</sup> from the start or when it became clear that Houdini was struggling, someone from the newspaper [slipped](#) him the key, as it would have been embarrassing had he failed to escape.

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<sup>44</sup> passed or handed secretly

<sup>45</sup> daring or impressive feat or performance

<sup>46</sup> organised or planned

<sup>47</sup> in partnership or collaboration with

<sup>48</sup> trick



[00:12:13] It's a secret to this day, but this was a [one-off<sup>49</sup>](#), a major spectacle.

[00:12:19] How did he escape during the “normal” shows?

[00:12:23] As you heard earlier, Houdini's genius was to allow anyone to present him with a lock or [handcuffs](#) and he would be able to escape from them. He couldn't [collude<sup>50</sup>](#), pre-arrange, with everyone he met, so how did he escape from all of these different locks?

[00:12:43] Well, according to Houdini experts and fellow magicians, Houdini had an almost [encyclopaedic<sup>51</sup>](#) knowledge of different types of locks. He had done an [apprenticeship<sup>52</sup>](#) with a locksmith when he was a boy, and had been studying locks ever since. He knew how they worked, how to [manipulate<sup>53</sup>](#) them, and how to get out of them.

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<sup>49</sup> unique or happening only once

<sup>50</sup> conspire or work secretly

<sup>51</sup> a lot of, extensive

<sup>52</sup> period of training

<sup>53</sup> control or handle skillfully

[00:13:08] For some locks, simply knowing how to knock them in the right place or move or shake them in the right way was [sufficient](#)<sup>54</sup> to [dislodge](#)<sup>55</sup> the internal mechanisms and break free.

[00:13:21] For others, Houdini would use a tiny piece of string to move the mechanism inside the lock.

[00:13:29] When this wasn't possible, Houdini was able to recognise what kind of key would fit almost any kind of lock, so he could instruct his faithful wife and assistant, Bess, to go backstage, find the appropriate key in his large collection, and [smuggle](#)<sup>56</sup> it to him in a glass of water, via a kiss, or in some secret way without the audience's knowledge. This is, of course, what is believed; Houdini never revealed any of this.

[00:14:01] If he had, the illusion would have been broken.

[00:14:05] And he was incredibly protective of his tricks, his escapes, and went to extraordinary [lengths](#)<sup>57</sup> to make sure that he was the only one who could do them.

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<sup>54</sup> enough or adequate

<sup>55</sup> remove or free from a position or place

<sup>56</sup> secretly bring

<sup>57</sup> great efforts or measures

[00:14:17] On a practical level, this meant copyrighting them, meaning that he was legally the only person who could do them.

[00:14:25] Importantly, this is different to a [patent<sup>58</sup>](#). A [patent](#), in case you didn't know, requires you to produce public information about how something is made or done, whereas copyright doesn't.

[00:14:39] Clearly, if your entire attraction is by [disguising<sup>59</sup>](#) how something is done, [patenting<sup>60</sup>](#) your invention is not the sort of thing you want to do.

[00:14:49] A quick [aside<sup>61</sup>](#), by the way, a side note, is that we have an entire episode on [patents<sup>62</sup>](#), and how they work. It's number 159, and is quite an [obscure<sup>63</sup>](#) but a fun one.

[00:15:02] Right, back to Houdini.

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<sup>58</sup> official legal protection for an invention or process

<sup>59</sup> concealing or hiding

<sup>60</sup> obtaining an official legal protection for an invention or process

<sup>61</sup> side note

<sup>62</sup> official licences for the exclusive use of an invention or process

<sup>63</sup> little-known or not widely understood

[00:15:05] After this amazing escape in London, his [fame](#) continued to grow. By this time, he was the most famous magician in the world, and was on a semi-permanent tour of Europe and the United States.

[00:15:20] And his tricks got even bigger. Making an elephant disappear, escaping from [straitjackets](#)<sup>64</sup>, those jackets that are used to [restrain](#)<sup>65</sup> prisoners, doing this upside down, underwater, and a combination of the two.

[00:15:37] He was not only an excellent magician, but he was also a talented self-publicist. He would [stage](#)<sup>66</sup> escapes outside the windows of newspaper offices, so that he [ensured](#)<sup>67</sup> journalists would write about him and their photographers wouldn't have to travel to [snap](#)<sup>68</sup> a picture of him.

[00:15:56] He was also [ruthless](#)<sup>69</sup> about competitors, and anyone who tried to copy or recreate his tricks would receive a [heavy-handed](#)<sup>70</sup> letter from his lawyers.

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<sup>64</sup> restraints used to prevent prisoners from moving

<sup>65</sup> hold back or prevent from moving

<sup>66</sup> present (a performance)

<sup>67</sup> made certain or guaranteed

<sup>68</sup> take a quick photograph

<sup>69</sup> showing no mercy or compassion

<sup>70</sup> harsh, forceful

[00:16:07] One other interesting fact about Houdini, which is perhaps surprising and isn't as well known as his magic tricks, is his later [crusade](#) against "[spiritualism](#)", the idea that you can communicate with the dead through things like [Ouija boards](#)<sup>71</sup> and [mediums](#)<sup>72</sup>.

[00:16:26] Houdini's [fame coincided](#)<sup>73</sup> with World War I, and in the immediate [aftermath](#)<sup>74</sup> of this period there was an understandable interest from [grieving](#)<sup>75</sup> parents, wives, brothers and sisters who wanted to communicate with loved ones killed on the battlefields of Europe.

[00:16:45] [Spiritualism](#) offered this possibility. Apart from, according to Houdini at least, it was a huge lie, a massive [scam](#)<sup>76</sup> [preying on](#)<sup>77</sup> the weak and vulnerable.

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<sup>71</sup> boards used to communicate with spirits

<sup>72</sup> individuals who claim to communicate with the dead

<sup>73</sup> happened at the same time

<sup>74</sup> period following a significant event

<sup>75</sup> feeling deep sorrow or sadness, especially due to a loss

<sup>76</sup> dishonest trick or deception

<sup>77</sup> exploiting or taking advantage of



[00:16:59] Houdini went on [something of a](#)<sup>78</sup> public [crusade](#) against [spiritualism](#); he was a magician himself, he knew a trick when he saw one, and he accused spiritualists of profiting from misery. He would go to [séances](#)<sup>79</sup> in disguise and expose spiritualist leaders when he saw them tricking their audience. He even wrote a book about it, and made it his mission to [shine a light on](#)<sup>80</sup> this [unscrupulous](#)<sup>81</sup> industry.

[00:17:30] And throughout the 1920s, he continued to perform, escaping from [handcuffs, straightjackets](#)<sup>82</sup>, underwater boxes, and any kind of lock that his audience would present him with.

[00:17:44] This audience interaction would be the [backbone](#)<sup>83</sup> of his career, it was a huge part of his [appeal](#)<sup>84</sup> and popularity, but it would also be his [undoing](#)<sup>85</sup>.

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<sup>78</sup> somewhat or to some extent

<sup>79</sup> gatherings to communicate with spirits

<sup>80</sup> bring attention to or expose

<sup>81</sup> lacking moral principles or honesty

<sup>82</sup> restraints used to prevent prisoners from moving

<sup>83</sup> foundation, basis

<sup>84</sup> quality of being attractive or interesting

<sup>85</sup> ruin, downfall

[00:17:56] One of the things that he had always **boasted**<sup>86</sup> to his fans was that he had an iron stomach and could **withstand**<sup>87</sup> a **punch**<sup>88</sup> to the stomach from anyone.

[00:18:08] Indeed, he would **pose**<sup>89</sup> with famous boxers of the day, and allow anyone to hit him without seemingly causing any kind of real pain.

[00:18:18] In terms of how he did this, firstly, he was very strong and muscly, which was important, but he could also prepare himself by **tensing**<sup>90</sup> his muscles and **bending down**<sup>91</sup> slightly, thereby protecting himself and **cushioning**<sup>92</sup> the blow.

[00:18:37] One day, however, when he was giving a lecture at McGill University in Montreal, a student came in and wanted to test Houdini's "iron stomach" for himself. He drew his hand back and hit Houdini as hard as he could, apart from Houdini didn't have time to prepare.

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<sup>86</sup> talked with pride about

<sup>87</sup> remain undamaged or unaffected by

<sup>88</sup> strike with the fist

<sup>89</sup> present himself in a specific position

<sup>90</sup> tighten, harden

<sup>91</sup> moving his upper body downward

<sup>92</sup> softening the effect of

[00:18:59] The **blow**<sup>93</sup> landed, Houdini fell to the ground in **agony**<sup>94</sup>, allegedly **mumbling**<sup>95</sup> "That will do". He **struggled on**<sup>96</sup> through the lecture, and then fell terribly ill on the train home. When he was eventually examined by doctors, they realised that the **punch** had **ruptured**<sup>97</sup> his **abdomen**<sup>98</sup>, and he died, perhaps appropriately for a magician, on Halloween, October 31st, of 1926.

[00:19:31] In terms of his legacy, practically all stage magicians since owe a debt to Houdini.

[00:19:38] Grand **escapologists**<sup>99</sup> like David Blaine and David Copperfield, or even people like Penn and Teller are continuing a tradition started by Harry Houdini.

[00:19:50] Everything about him was magical and theatrical, from the instantly memorable name to the showmanship of every performance, from the nature of his

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<sup>93</sup> hit, strike

<sup>94</sup> extreme pain

<sup>95</sup> saying in a unclear way, muttering

<sup>96</sup> continued while experiencing a lot of difficulty

<sup>97</sup> broke, cut

<sup>98</sup> belly, stomach

<sup>99</sup> magicians specialising in escape acts

death to the fact that he was buried in a [bronze<sup>100</sup> coffin<sup>101</sup>](#) that had once been used in one of his tricks.

[00:20:08] Now, to conclude this episode, I promised that I'd tell you how he made that elephant disappear.

[00:20:15] Well, nobody actually knows for sure, and Houdini took the secret to the [grave<sup>102</sup>](#) with him, but most modern magicians believe that the elephant never actually left the box.

[00:20:27] The box was a lot bigger than Houdini said it was, it just looked smaller given the fact that it was on a massive stage. There was a secret compartment in the box, small but large enough to hide an elephant, and because the lights were kept relatively low in the Hippodrome, and the [angle<sup>103</sup>](#) was such that no audience member could see the entire way through the box, nobody could see that the elephant was still there, hidden away in a dark corner.

[00:20:57] Houdini is once reported to have said "Anyone who believes in magic is a fool."

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<sup>100</sup> brown type of metal

<sup>101</sup> box used for burying the dead

<sup>102</sup> place in the ground where he is buried

<sup>103</sup> viewpoint or perspective

[00:21:05] Who knows whether anyone in the audience really believed that Houdini had made the five-tonne elephant [vanish](#) by magic, but one thing is for certain: it must have been the most amazing spectacle.

[00:21:20] OK then, that is it for today's episode on Harry Houdini, The Master of Escape.

[00:21:27] I hope it's been an interesting one, and whether you're a magic [connoisseur](#) <sup>104</sup> or you've never heard the name of Harry Houdini before, well, I hope you've learnt something new.

[00:21:37] As always, I would love to know what you thought about this episode.

[00:21:40] How much did you know about the life of Harry Houdini?

[00:21:44] What do you think was his most impressive magic trick?

[00:21:47] Do you agree with the fact that he was the greatest magician of all time?

[00:21:51] I would love to know, so let's get this discussion started.

[00:21:55] You can head right into our community forum, which is at [community.leonardoenglish.com](http://community.leonardoenglish.com) and get chatting away to other curious minds.

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<sup>104</sup> expert, specialist



**English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #389**  
**Harry Houdini | The Master of Escape**

[00:22:03] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:22:08] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

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## **Key vocabulary**

Word	Definition
Daring	brave or bold
A keen eye	ability to notice and find things
Crusade	a campaign or a passionate movement for a cause
Spiritualism	belief in communication with the spirits of the dead
Waited with bated breath	waited anxiously or in suspense
Stocky	wide and strong-looking
Ramp	inclined or sloping surface joining two different levels
Petite	small and dainty or delicate
Into thin air	completely and mysteriously
Vanish	disappear suddenly or completely
Coaxing	persuading or gently encouraging

<b>Slammed</b>	closed forcefully and with a loud noise
<b>Spun</b>	turned or rotated quickly
<b>Anxious</b>	feeling worried or uneasy
<b>Vanished</b>	disappeared suddenly or completely
<b>Model himself on</b>	imitate or take inspiration from
<b>For sake of ease</b>	for the purpose of convenience
<b>Acrobatics</b>	gymnastic or athletic moves or performances
<b>Excelled</b>	performed exceptionally well
<b>Mere</b>	simply or just
<b>Trapeze</b>	horizontal bar hanging by two ropes in the air used in acrobatics
<b>Teaming up</b>	joining together as a team
<b>Half-decent</b>	moderately good or acceptable
<b>Initially</b>	at first or in the beginning
<b>Big break</b>	significant opportunity or chance for success
<b>Handcuffs</b>	metal rings placed around the wrists to prevent movement

<b>In-demand</b>	highly sought after or requested
<b>Signature trick</b>	a distinctive or characteristic magic trick
<b>All manner of</b>	various types or kinds of
<b>Stunts</b>	daring or impressive performances
<b>Encouraged</b>	motivated or inspired
<b>Fame</b>	recognition and reputation
<b>Flocking</b>	gathering or coming together in large numbers
<b>Commissioned</b>	requested or ordered the creation of
<b>Mortal</b>	living human being
<b>Ever the</b>	always being or behaving like
<b>Fastened</b>	securely attached or closed
<b>Cuffs</b>	shortened form of "handcuffs"
<b>Popped out</b>	emerged or appeared suddenly
<b>Sweat</b>	perspiration or moisture produced by the body
<b>Sore</b>	in pain or uncomfortable

<b>Cushion</b>	a soft object used for support or comfort
<b>Whipped out</b>	quickly and suddenly took out or displayed
<b>Slipped</b>	passed or handed secretly
<b>Stunt</b>	daring or impressive feat or performance
<b>Orchestrated</b>	organised or planned
<b>In conjunction with</b>	in partnership or collaboration with
<b>Set-up</b>	trick
<b>One-off</b>	unique or happening only once
<b>Collude</b>	conspire or work secretly
<b>Encyclopaedic</b>	a lot of, extensive
<b>Apprenticeship</b>	period of training
<b>Manipulate</b>	control or handle skillfully
<b>Sufficient</b>	enough or adequate
<b>Dislodge</b>	remove or free from a position or place
<b>Smuggle</b>	secretly bring

<b>Lengths</b>	great efforts or measures
<b>Patent</b>	official legal protection for an invention or process
<b>Disguising</b>	concealing or hiding
<b>Patenting</b>	obtaining an official legal protection for an invention or process
<b>Aside</b>	side note
<b>Patents</b>	official licences for the exclusive use of an invention or process
<b>Obscure</b>	little-known or not widely understood
<b>Straitjackets</b>	restraints used to prevent prisoners from moving
<b>Restrain</b>	hold back or prevent from moving
<b>Stage</b>	present (a performance)
<b>Ensured</b>	made certain or guaranteed
<b>Snap</b>	take a quick photograph
<b>Ruthless</b>	showing no mercy or compassion
<b>Heavy-handed</b>	harsh, forceful
<b>Ouija boards</b>	boards used to communicate with spirits

<b>Mediums</b>	individuals who claim to communicate with the dead
<b>Coincided</b>	happened at the same time
<b>Aftermath</b>	period following a significant event
<b>Grieving</b>	feeling deep sorrow or sadness, especially due to a loss
<b>Scam</b>	dishonest trick or deception
<b>Preying on</b>	exploiting or taking advantage of
<b>Something of a</b>	somewhat or to some extent
<b>Séances</b>	gatherings to communicate with spirits
<b>Shine a light on</b>	bring attention to or expose
<b>Unscrupulous</b>	lacking moral principles or honesty
<b>Straightjackets</b>	restraints used to prevent prisoners from moving
<b>Backbone</b>	foundation, basis
<b>Appeal</b>	quality of being attractive or interesting
<b>Undoing</b>	ruin, downfall
<b>Boasted</b>	talked with pride about

<b>Withstand</b>	remain undamaged or unaffected by
<b>Punch</b>	strike with the fist
<b>Pose</b>	present himself in a specific position
<b>Tensing</b>	tighten, harden
<b>Bending down</b>	moving his upper body downward
<b>Cushioning</b>	softening the effect of
<b>Blow</b>	hit, strike
<b>Agony</b>	extreme pain
<b>Mumbling</b>	saying in an unclear way, muttering
<b>Struggled on</b>	continued while experiencing a lot of difficulty
<b>Ruptured</b>	broke, cut
<b>Abdomen</b>	belly, stomach
<b>Escapologists</b>	magicians specialising in escape acts
<b>Bronze</b>	brown type of metal
<b>Coffin</b>	a box used for burying the dead



**English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #389**  
**Harry Houdini | The Master of Escape**

**Grave** place in the ground where he is buried

**Angle** viewpoint, perspective

**Connoisseur** expert, specialist

## **Language spotlight**

### **1. Waited with bated breath**

- Meaning: Waited eagerly and anxiously.
- Synonyms: Held one's breath, waited in suspense.
- Antonyms: Stayed calm, didn't anticipate.
- Examples:
  - "The audience **waited with bated breath** to see if Houdini would escape from the handcuffs."
  - "We are **waiting with bated breath** for the exam results to be announced."

### **2. Vanished into thin air**

- Meaning: Disappeared completely and mysteriously.
- Synonyms: Disappeared without a trace, evaporated.
- Antonyms: Appeared, materialised.
- Examples:

- "The magician performed a trick where the rabbit **vanished into thin air.**"
- "The thief managed to steal the valuable diamond and **vanished into thin air** before anyone noticed."

### 3. Model himself on

- Meaning: Imitate or take someone as an example.
- Synonyms: Emulate, follow in the footsteps of.
- Antonyms: Diverge, deviate.
- Examples:
  - "Houdini decided to **model himself on** the famous magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin."
  - "As an aspiring artist, I always **modelled myself on** the works of my favourite painter."

### 4. Flock to

- Meaning: Gathering or coming in large numbers.
- Synonyms: Swarming, converging.
- Antonyms: Scattering, dispersing.

- Examples:
  - "People were **flocking to** Houdini's shows to witness his incredible escapes."
  - "Tourists from around the world were **flocking to** the famous landmark to take photos."

#### 5. Shine a light on

- Meaning: Draw attention to, reveal or expose.
- Synonyms: Illuminate, shed light on.
- Antonyms: Conceal, hide.
- Examples:
  - "Houdini wanted to **shine a light on** the tricks used by fraudulent spiritualists."
  - "The investigative journalist aimed to **shine a light on** corruption within the government."

## **Quiz**

### **Listening Comprehension Multiple Choice Questions**

1. In the podcast, who was referred to as "The Master of Escape"?  
  
a) Harry Houdini  
  
b) Theodore Houdini  
  
c) Alastair Budge  
  
d) Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin
  
2. What was Houdini's reaction after escaping from the handcuffs made by The Daily Mirror?  
  
a) He celebrated with the audience.  
  
b) He apologised for the delay.  
  
c) He was exhausted.  
  
d) He demanded a bigger challenge.

3. What did the audience see when the box was opened after Houdini's trick with the elephant?

- a) The elephant was still there.
- b) The elephant had vanished.
- c) The elephant had turned into a rabbit.
- d) The elephant had grown bigger.

4. Where was Harry Houdini born?

- a) Hungary
- b) France
- c) United States
- d) England

5. What did Houdini accuse spiritualists of doing?

- a) Exploiting people's fears
- b) Communicating with the dead

c) Performing magic tricks

d) Praying for miracles

**True or False:**

6. Houdini's real name was Harry Houdini. (True/False)

7. Houdini's first big break came in 1904 in London. (True/False)

8. Houdini's signature trick involved escaping from handcuffs. (True/False)

9. Houdini's escape from the special handcuffs made by The Daily Mirror was unsuccessful. (True/False)

10. Houdini shared his secrets with his competitors. (True/False)

**Fill-in-the-Blank:**

11. Houdini was known as the "Father of \_\_\_\_\_."

12. Houdini's wife and \_\_\_\_\_ 's name was Bess.

13. Houdini's signature trick involved escaping from \_\_\_\_\_.

14. Houdini exposed the fraudulent practices of \_\_\_\_\_.

15. He would \_\_\_\_\_ escapes outside the windows of newspaper offices.

**Vocabulary Practice:**

16. What is the meaning of the word "**stocky**"?

- a) Thin and lean
- b) Short and sturdy
- c) Tall and lanky
- d) Flexible and agile

17. What does the expression "**vanish into thin air**" mean?

- a) Disappear completely
- b) Transform into something else
- c) Float above the ground
- d) Move quickly and silently

18. What is the synonym of "**encouraged**"?



a) Prevented

b) Supported

c) Hindered

d) Obstructed

19. What does the word "**patent**" mean in the context of the podcast?

a) An official document granting ownership of an invention

b) A trick or illusion performed by a magician

c) A legal contract between Houdini and his assistant

d) A certificate of achievement in magic

20. What is the antonym of "**ruthless**"?

a) Merciless

b) Kindhearted

c) Cruel

d) Harsh

## **Answers**

1. a) Harry Houdini
2. c) He was exhausted.
3. b) The elephant had vanished.
4. a) Hungary
5. a) Exploiting people's fears
6. False
7. False
8. True
9. False
10. False
11. Modern magic
12. assistant
13. handcuffs
14. spiritualism
15. stage
16. b) Short and sturdy
17. a) Disappear completely
18. b) Supported
19. a) An official document granting ownership of an invention
20. b) Kindhearted