Harry Houdini is the most famous magician and escape artist of all time. He was born Ehrich Weisz in 1874 in Budapest, Hungary. When he was four his family moved to Appleton, Wisconsin and his last name became Weiss due to a misspelling by immigration officials. Like many immigrants of the time, they were a poor family. Ehrich had to work to help supplement the income his father made as a rabbi. They relocated to New York City.

Ehrich had become fascinated with magic at a young age. This fascination led to his choosing it as an alternative to factory work when he was 17. With a friend, he formed an act called The Houdini Brothers, using the name Houdini as tribute to Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin, a famous magician of the time. He also changed his first name to Harry. After a couple of years, his friend left the act. Houdini replaced him with one of his brothers. However, this teaming was even shorter lived, for soon Harry Houdini married. His wife, Wilhelmina Beatrice Rahner (or Bess) became his partner. The duo then called themselves "The Houdinis".

Harry Houdini was a small man of 5'5", but he was extremely strong and athletic. He was also highly motivated to succeed. Still, he was not an instant success. Starting out with card tricks, he billed himself as the King of Cards. He gradually moved on to large illusions and run-of-the-mill box escape routines.

The real take-off point in his career may have been in 1898 when he invented the...
"Escape Challenge". With this routine, he dared spectators to handcuff or tie him in unusual knots. He would then miraculously free himself or "escape". Soon, he and Bess were performing on vaudeville stages throughout the country. As his popularity and fame grew so did the number of places he performed. He performed in Europe and even in Australia.

His increasingly complicated escapes and illusions created the image of a super hero. No handcuffs, straitjacket or jail cell could hold him. One routine featured him escaping from a straitjacket while hanging upside down high above the ground. In his famed Metamorphosis act, Houdini performed with his wife who was locked in a trunk. In another, Houdini escaped from a locked metal can full of liquid, and in the Water Cell Torture he was shackled and hung upside down in a tank full of water. He vanished elephants on stage and "walked" through a brick wall.

When Houdini was performing on the vaudeville circuit in the early 1900's, he worked with a couple named Keaton. The couple had a young son who was intrigued by Houdini's magic. One day the boy took a fall down some stairs. Although the boy wasn't injured Houdini nicknamed him "Buster". The nickname stuck and the boy grew up to become Buster Keaton one of the greatest and most inventive comedians of the silent movie era.

And speaking of the silent movie era, in 1919 Harry Houdini established his own short-lived movie company. He made several silent films in which he starred and performed dangerous stunts. However, the films, unlike his magic, were not very successful.

Houdini's love for daredevil and exotic endeavors extended even to airplanes.
1910, he was on a performing tour in Australia, and during the tour he became one of the first people to fly a plane on that continent.

After his mother's death in 1913 Houdini consulted a spiritualist. His hope was to communicate with his dead mother. What he found instead were spirit mediums using magic tricks to con their victims. This set him off on a new crusade. He began attending séances in disguise, his purpose being to reveal mediums as frauds. He also began devoting parts of his performances to exposure shows, duplicating the ghostly apparitions, noises and mysterious levitations of the spiritualist.

He did expose some mediums as frauds, but his crusade also strained a friendship he had formed with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes stories. Conan Doyle was a great believer in spiritualism and refused to believe Houdini’s exposures. In fact, some say Conan Doyle actually believed Houdini himself had magical powers that he used to perform his seemingly impossible stunts.

In the fall of 1926, Houdini and Bess were in the middle of another tour when he began having severe stomach discomfort. Not wanting to interrupt his tour, he refused medical treatment. A university student allegedly punched an unprepared Houdini in the abdomen several times to test his well-known ability to withstand body blows. Whether the punches had anything to do with what followed isn’t known. However, a week or two later Houdini collapsed on stage in Detroit, Michigan with a ruptured appendix and peritonitis. A number of days later on Halloween Harry Houdini died. He was 52 years old.

But that isn't the end of the Harry Houdini story. Houdini had apparently made a pact with Bess that he would contact her from “the other side” if such a thing were possible. Bess began attending publicized séances every Halloween. He never did
communicate with her, however, and after ten years she stopped the séances.

Still, Harry Houdini lives on. Magicians continue to perform many of his famous routines, mystifying and entertaining audiences the world over. And in July 2002 the United States Postal Service issue a postage stamp with his likeness.
Harry Houdini

1) Classify the following sentences as true (if it's mentioned in the passage), false (if it contradicts the text) and not given (If the information is not mentioned in the passage).

a) Harry developed a liking for magic at a young age. 

________________________

b) Harry didn't become a great magician overnight.  

________________________

c) Before Bess, his wife, became Harry's partner in performances, he had worked with three partners.  

________________________

d) Unlike his magic acts, the movies that Harry made were unsuccessful.  

________________________

e) Harry's main intention in consulting a spiritualist was to prove spiritualists wrong.  

________________________

f) Harry's magic acts were greatly inspired by Sherlock Holmes stories.  

________________________

2) The writer attributes certain physical and mental qualities to Houdini. Can you enlist them?

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

3) What was the original purpose for Houdini's association with the spiritualists? Did this purpose change? If yes, expound on the new purpose.

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________
4) Explain the cause that strained the friendship between Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

5) Write a short note on the given terms used in the passage.
   - Vaudeville
   - Séance
   - Levitation

Séance - 

Levitation - 

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Harry Houdini

1) Classify the following sentences as true (if it's mentioned in the passage), false (if it contradicts the text) and not given (If the information is not mentioned in the passage).

   a) Harry developed a liking for magic at a young age.  
      ____________ True ____________

   b) Harry didn't become a great magician overnight.  
      ____________ True ____________

   c) Before Bess, his wife, became Harry's partner in performances, he had worked with three partners.  
      ____________ False ____________

   d) Unlike his magic, the movies that Harry made were unsuccessful.  
      ____________ True ____________

   e) Harry's main intention in consulting a spiritualist was to prove spiritualists wrong.  
      ____________ False ____________

   f) Harry's magic acts were greatly inspired by Sherlock Holmes stories.  
      ____________ Not given ____________

2) The writer attributes certain physical and mental qualities to Houdini. Can you enlist them?

Houdini was extremely strong and athletic. He was both daring and adventurous. He was not only highly motivated to succeed, but he supplemented this with hard work and perseverance. His refusal to take medical treatment in order to not interrupt the tour, speaks volumes of his professional dedication.

3) What was the original purpose for Houdini's association with the spiritualists? Did this purpose change? If yes, expound on the new purpose.

Houdini originally consulted a spiritualist hoping to communicate with his dead mother. Yes, this purpose changed as he realized that spirit mediums were using magic tricks to con their victims. This set him off on a new
Harry Houdini

crusade. He began attending séances in disguise, his purpose being to reveal mediums as frauds. He also began devoting parts of his performances to exposure shows, duplicating the ghostly apparitions, noises and mysterious levitations of the spiritualist. He did succeed in exposing some mediums as frauds.

4) Explain the cause that strained the friendship between Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

In his crusade to expose the spirit mediums as frauds, Houdini strained his friendship with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, as the latter was a great believer in spiritualism and refused to believe Houdini's exposures. In fact, some say Conan Doyle actually believed Houdini himself had magical powers that he used to perform his seemingly impossible stunts.

5) Write a short note on the given terms used in the passage.

- Séance - It's a meeting in which people try to communicate with the dead through the agency of a medium.
- Levitation - It's the act of rising and floating, or making someone rise or float without physical effort.

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