



The Great Houdini

by Lamar Hooten

- ¹ Have you ever heard the name Houdini? He was a performer at the turn of the twentieth century who gained fame as an escape artist. He knew how to release himself from rope bonds, handcuffs, and more.
- ² Houdini always wanted to perform athletic feats. As a child, he worked hard shining shoes and selling newspapers. The money the boy earned helped support his family. In his time off

he practiced to be an acrobat. His first show was as "Ehrich, the Prince of the Air." The nine-year-old thrilled his audience with stunts on a trapeze that hung from a tree.

- ³ "Ehrich" was more than Houdini's stage name. It was his given name. Houdini was born Ehrich Weisz. Until Ehrich was a toddler, he and his family lived in Hungary. Then they moved to the United States so that Ehrich's father

- could find work. They settled in the town of Appleton, Wisconsin. Ehrich loved Appleton and always thought of it as his hometown.
- 4 Ehrich took the stage name "Houdini" when he was a teenager. He named himself after a man he admired. The man's name was Robert-Houdin. He was famous for performing illusions. Ehrich was fascinated by sleight-of-hand tricks. He studied Robert-Houdin's work. Ehrich became good enough at performing illusions to start his own act.
- 5 Ehrich first performed with a friend and later one of his brothers. He called their act "The Brothers Houdini." They traveled to theaters and fairs. There they performed card tricks and other illusions. Then Ehrich met and married his wife, Bess. He and Bess formed their own traveling act called simply "The Houdinis." In it, Ehrich performed illusions, and Bess sang and danced.
- 6 They traveled the world performing. But their act was not popular until Ehrich did something amazing. Before a show, he had himself handcuffed to a pillar. Then a crowd watched as he freed himself without using keys. They could not believe it! Others wanted to see this incredible feat. Ehrich began to perform it regularly. He always asked a real policeman to restrain him. He did this to prove that he was not using trick handcuffs.
- 7 Ehrich closely guarded his secret to doing the trick. He admitted, though, that he had once worked for a locksmith. During this time, he had learned to unlock things without using a key. This was a skill that not many knew in his time.
- 8 It was not only skill that made Ehrich an amazing performer. He was also very strong and brave. Ehrich kept coming up with ideas for making his act more thrilling. He learned to free himself from other restraints. He could escape locked chains, ropes, and special jackets that bound his arms to his body.
- 9 All of these feats required much training. Ehrich practiced holding his breath for long periods in a large bathtub at his home. He taught himself to use both of his hands with almost equal skill. He learned to use his feet to untie rope. He practiced wrestling free of various restraints until it took only a matter of minutes to escape each one.
- 10 One stunt nearly cost him his life. Ehrich put on handcuffs and chains. Then he jumped through a hole in the ice and into the icy water of a river. When he freed himself and returned to the surface of the water, Ehrich found that the current had moved him away from the hole. He was trapped under the ice and could feel his body starting to go numb. Ehrich soon discovered that there was a pocket of air between the surface of the water and the ice. Using that to breathe, he was able to move around and find a rope that had been lowered in to rescue him. He had been under the water for eight minutes.
- 11 Ehrich was also a master showman. He was an able speaker and had a likeable personality. In addition, he never settled for "good enough." When he could do a trick perfectly, he added something to the trick to make it even more suspenseful or astounding. He always strived to be more skillful and entertaining.
- 12 Ehrich and his wife performed for the circus and in theaters. Then Ehrich went on to do elaborate stunts for the movies. By now he was called the Great Houdini, and this was how he would be known ever after. Just as he had studied Robert-Houdin, others now studied Ehrich.
- 13 Ehrich continued to perform until within days of his death. Some claimed he died practicing one of his tricks. The truth is that he died from an illness for which there was no cure in his time. Many mourned the passing of this man who had become a famous folk hero. But the name Houdini was not forgotten, and Ehrich is celebrated as a master escape artist to this very day.

COMPREHENSION

- A** Choose the best ending for each sentence. Write *a*, *b*, or *c*.
- This story is mainly about how Ehrich
 - spent his childhood.
 - became a great performer.
 - learned to unlock handcuffs.
 - A problem Ehrich had as an early performer was
 - his act was not popular.
 - no one liked his handcuff trick.
 - he could not decide on a stage name.
 - Ehrich improved his act by
 - singing and dancing.
 - giving up on performing illusions.
 - Neither **a** nor **b**
 - When Ehrich mastered a stunt, he
 - added something new to the stunt.
 - performed only that stunt until the audience grew bored with it.
 - stopped performing his old stunts.
 - If Ehrich had not worked so hard training and coming up with new ideas, he
 - would have enjoyed the same amount of success.
 - may not have been as successful.
 - would have lived a longer life.

LEARN ABOUT WORDS

- B** Often you can find out the meaning of a word by seeing how it is used in a story. The other words in the story give you clues.
- Find the word in the story that best fits each meaning. (A paragraph number tells you where to look.) Write the word.
- free (1)
 - well-known; popular (4)
 - put together; make (5)
 - one who builds locks (7)
 - daring acts (9)
 - expert (11)
 - showed sorrow (13)
- C** A word may have more than one meaning. Its meaning will depend on how it is used.
- The *fly* buzzed around the room.
The bird will *fly* to its nest.
- Look at each word in **bold type** below. Note the paragraph number. Look back at the paragraph. Which meaning does the word have there? Write *a* or *b*.
- bonds** (1)
 - ties
 - sticks to
 - stage** (3)
 - phase; step
 - raised platform on which entertainers perform
 - cure** (13)
 - heal
 - medicine

THINK ABOUT IT

- D** One word in this row doesn't belong with the others.

chickens ducks ~~foxes~~

Foxes are not birds. *Foxes* is the word that doesn't belong.

Which word doesn't belong in each row? Write the word.

- | | | |
|-------------------|--------|--------|
| 1 arms | lungs | legs |
| 2 mountain | bridge | tunnel |
| 3 ice | rain | hole |
| 4 walk | swim | run |
| 5 suit | chain | rope |

- E** A metaphor is a figure of speech that compares two things that are not alike without using the words *like* or *as*. Metaphors sometimes exaggerate. In other words, they make something seem bigger, better, worse, or more important than it really is.

Mary Lou is *a lamb*.

This means Mary Lou is gentle.

Read each sentence. The words in **bold type** are metaphors. One of the words in parentheses () tells what the metaphor means. Write the word.

- 6** When it came to escaping, Houdini was **an artist**. (painter, creative)
- 7** Houdini's fingers were **ice cubes** in the cold water. (cold, slippery)
- 8** Houdini had nerves of **steel**. (strong, metal)

- 9** He was **dead tired** after working to escape. (exhausted, not living)

- 10** **Explosions of joy** greeted the man's escape. (bombs, cheers)

- F** The words *a*, *an*, and *the* are called articles. You use *a* if the next word tells about one thing and begins with a consonant.

Houdini was *a* brave man.

You use *an* if the next word tells about one thing and begins with a vowel.

He was *an* escape artist.

You use *the* if the next word names a particular person, place, or thing. You also use *the* if the next word tells about more than one.

He jumped into *the* river and opened *the* handcuffs.

Read each sentence. Which article in parentheses () fits each sentence? Write the word.

- 11** Houdini escaped from (a, an) locked cell.
- 12** He knew a secret way to open (a, the) locks.
- 13** The cold river almost became (a, an) icy grave for Houdini.
- 14** He became (a, an) famous man.
- 15** He was (a, an) exciting performer.