

# Chapter 1: Famous in Boston

*Millard Franklin*

The enormous, gold-trimmed clock at Providence's Union Station read seven forty-five as I paced the platform, waiting for Uncle Henry. In one hand, I clutched two crisp train tickets. In the other, I held the crumpled telegram that had been delivered to my uncle at his locksmith shop earlier that morning:

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 1906

MR. FRANKLIN [STOP] HARRY HOUDINI WANTS TO  
SEE YOUR MARINE PADLOCKS [STOP] BRING THEM  
TO PARKER HOUSE HOTEL, BOSTON, THIS MORNING  
[STOP] TWO TICKETS AT PROVIDENCE STATION FOR  
EIGHT AM TRAIN [STOP] WILL MEET YOU AT SOUTH  
STATION [STOP]

URIAH HOLMES—MANAGER, PARKER HOUSE HOTEL

For the past four years, whenever any magician, professional or amateur, performed within fifty miles of our home, I'd been in the audience, analyzing all of his routines. I'd seen Alexander read people's minds in Worcester; watched as Johnny and Nellie Olms made an old lady disappear in Springfield; and even saw tiny Annie Abbott single-handedly lift up four grown men at the Boston Music Hall last year. After every show, I'd gone backstage to ask the performers about their tricks, to see if they'd tell me just one of their secrets, because, more than anything else in the world, I wanted to be one of them: a professional magician. Which was why the prospect of personally meeting the Great One, Harry Houdini, now had me literally dancing from one foot to the other on the train platform.

Unfortunately, as my interest in magic had grown, Uncle Henry's dislike for the profession also had increased. He'd tolerated my "ridiculous hobby," as he called it, until my father's death last spring, but ever since then he'd made it very difficult for me to perform or even to see other magicians. Whenever my

uncle found out that I had a show scheduled, he would insist I work at his lock shop during that time. If I mentioned that I wanted to attend a performance, he'd send me on useless errands until it was too late for me to make it to the show.

"Performers are the lowest sort of animal," he said. "Not the kind of people you should associate with and certainly not the type you should aspire to become." No matter what I said, I couldn't get him to see anything favorable about being a magician.

So I found it ironic that I was getting the opportunity to meet the Great Houdini courtesy of Uncle Henry. My uncle had invented a marine padlock that didn't rust or corrode. He had displayed his invention at a locksmiths' convention at the Parker House Hotel in Boston this past spring. Yesterday, when the hotel's manager overheard Houdini, a guest, complaining about his padlocks rusting, he remembered seeing Uncle Henry's marine padlock and mentioned it to the magician. And so—*abracadabra*—my uncle had been invited back to Boston to show his innovative locks to Houdini, and I was going along as his assistant. I'd tucked my interlocking rings and a length of chain into the black leather tool bag, just in case. Imagine the thrill of actually getting to perform for Harry Houdini! It would be simply amazing. I hadn't figured out how I was going to manage it, though. We were there to demonstrate a lock, not to show him any of my tricks—but I intended to try. When would I ever get this chance again?

As the smell of fresh-baked blueberry muffins from the pushcarts filled the air, I looked up at the station clock again. After receiving the telegram at the shop, Uncle Henry had insisted upon returning to his home on Providence's East Side to change into his best suit, sending me ahead to the station to pick up the tickets. Now, my uncle, who had never been late for anything in his life, was in danger of missing this very important train. Important to me, not to him. He probably couldn't care less about meeting the one and only Harry Houdini.

If my uncle didn't get to the station in time, what should I do? Miss the train too and forfeit my chance to meet Houdini?

Or go to Boston by myself? I had the marine padlocks in the tool bag sitting on the platform by my feet. I could easily demonstrate them. Heck, I'd been the one who'd actually built them—based upon my uncle's design—so I knew them inside and out. If I went to the meeting without Uncle Henry, he'd be quite sore at me, but he'd probably get over it and I'd get to meet the man who invented the Chinese Water Torture Escape Trick. Really, not a very difficult decision. A minute later, when the Boston-bound train's whistle hooted a puff of steam announcing its impending departure, I grabbed the heavy bag and elbowed my way into the chattering crowd shuffling toward the doors of the train.

Just then, Uncle Henry hurried over to me, his black and gold walking stick clicking on the station's tile floor. "And where, may I ask, are you going?"

"Saving you a place in line." I handed him his ticket, my face hot with my lie. I was actually disappointed that my uncle had arrived in time to catch the train; I wanted to speak to Houdini alone, without Uncle Henry's interference, especially considering his bad attitude about magic...and Jews. I glanced over at my uncle, standing next to me in line, and caught him admiring his own reflection in the black lacquer of the train car.

We climbed on board and Uncle Henry let me sit near one of the big windows while he took the aisle seat next to me. I knew he hadn't done this because he knew I'd want to look out the window. No, he just wanted to be more visible to the other passengers so they could admire his appearance. The car was full of other businessmen, also reading today's *Providence Journal*, but Uncle Henry was by far the best dressed. I recognized the light gray suit he was now wearing as one he'd had custom-tailored in New York City a few months earlier. He'd probably been looking for just such an opportunity to show it off.

As the long train puffed out of the station, I sat up tall in my seat and peered through the heavy blue curtains. In the harbor below, I could see a passenger steamship cruising Narragansett Bay on its way to the open ocean. With its twin black smokestacks and double wooden side-paddles, I recognized it as the *Edgemont*, a vessel I'd seen often in the Port of Providence. I watched the

ship slip away to the south as our train barreled northward, bringing me closer to personally meeting the best magician in the world. I could hardly believe my good fortune.

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“South Station, Boston. End of the line. Everybody off.”

I quickly gathered my hat, coat, and the loaded tool bag and hurried to follow Uncle Henry to the rear of the car. Descending the train’s black metal steps, I inhaled the aromas of coffee and cinnamon from the vendors’ stalls lining the station’s tiled walls. My stomach growled loudly, reminding me I’d been too excited to eat any breakfast. Oh well. Eating would have to wait until later; I certainly didn’t want to take the time now. We were on our way to meet Harry Houdini!

A middle-aged man in an ill-fitting red and black uniform strutted up to us, his stomach looking like it was about to explode out the front of his jacket. “Mr. Franklin,” he said in a high, squeaky voice. “I’m Mr. Holmes, manager at the Parker House Hotel.”

My uncle nodded. “Thank you for remembering me and my marine padlock, Mr. Holmes. I’m quite honored.”

Holmes frowned. “I certainly hope it’s as good as you said it was. It would be disastrous to disappoint such an important guest.” He hustled us through the crowd to an elegant black coach emblazoned in red with the hotel’s name. The driver, wearing a similar uniform, opened and closed the coach door for us and then climbed up to his perch behind the box. With one slap of his reins, his handsome bay-colored mare set off at a good clip in the weak morning sunlight.

I’d only been to Boston twice in my life, both times when I was much younger, so I couldn’t help gaping at the big city’s sights as they flew by the coach’s large windows. I marveled at the massive white stone columns of the train station, the small lake full of graceful swan boats in the Boston Commons, the gilded dome of the capitol building, and all the citified people everywhere, rushing around in their high-buttoned collars and big-bustled skirts.

In less than ten minutes, we pulled up to an impressive eight-story stone building that had a large awning illuminated with twinkling electric lights. I'd never seen so many light bulbs in one place before, but the excess seemed appropriate for a place that would host the Great Houdini.

Another man wearing a red and black uniform opened the coach door for us. "Welcome to the Parker House Hotel."

Mr. Holmes hopped out of the coach and hurried through the gold and glass doors into the lobby. Uncle Henry clambered down and trotted after him. I started to drag the tool bag toward the carriage door myself but was glad when the tall porter reached in and easily picked it up for me, and then handed it to me after I'd climbed down to the sidewalk. I wished I had some change in my pocket for him.

Uncle Henry poked his head out the hotel door and hissed, "Millard, come on!"

Together we rushed through the lobby, with its ornately carved wood-paneled walls, oversized green leather furniture, and glittering golden chandeliers, and found Mr. Holmes waiting inside the golden cage of the open elevator. Once we were aboard, he barked, "Presidential Suite," to the operator, a skinny, frightened-looking boy about my age.

On the hotel's top floor, the boy opened the elevator's cage to reveal a long corridor with plush carpet and golden wall lights. As the three of us rushed down the hallway, I found myself wishing that I'd spent more time polishing my shoes before work that morning. As my older brother Thomas would say, the Parker House was a "swanky" place.

The manager rapped sharply on a door labeled "Presidential Suite," which was immediately opened by a huge man with bright red hair.

"Mr. Holmes," the giant said with a slight bow.

Gesturing toward my uncle and smiling obsequiously, the manager said, "I've brought Mr. Franklin, the locksmith."

"Come in." The giant opened the door wider.

"I'm needed downstairs," Mr. Holmes said, his nose elevated. He peered up at Uncle Henry. "Assist Mr. Houdini with