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ROBERT GRAVES

YOU WIN, HOUDINI!

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Dear Captain Graves,

You're unlikely to recall my name after so long a lapse, though we coincided at the Royal Welch Depôt a couple of times in 1916; but you can't have forgotten 'Houdini' Cashman. I had a mind to write you about him when I first read your autobiography, and there came across a mention of his abrupt departure from the regiment two or three months after the Armistice. You say:

... next day the senior lieutenant of the company which I was to have taken over went off with the cash-box, and I should have been legally responsible for the loss of £200. Before the war he used to give displays on Blackpool Pier as 'The Handcuff King'. He got away safely to the United States.

The subject nagged at me again when you reissued the book last year and, to cap it all, I had a letter from young Bob Stack -- the bigger, taller brother of Dick Stack, who was in the 2nd Battalion with you; I don't think you knew Bob. He was one of the best, and did pretty well for himself when he emigrated to Australia and made a fortune in wool. He now has nine grandchildren, one of whom is named Daniel in my honour. We still write each other every so often and regularly exchange cards at Christmas. Anyhow, he sent me a Melbourne newspaper cutting about the death in prison of one Victor Cashman, formerly a professional conjuror. There can't be more than one Victor Cashman in the conjuring world: besides, the story makes good sense to anyone who knew Houdini. So, before it's too late, I'm going to get the whole saga off my chest, and apologize in advance for its inordinate length, hoping that you won't be bored.

I recall Houdini's arrival at the Depôt in June 1917, when the Military Service Act was

flooding the regiment with swarms of skrim-shankers who had been winkled out of non-essential jobs -- scrapings from the bottom of a pretty foul barrel. Of course, along with them came some red-hot lads just old enough to qualify for the sausage-machine. As for the new officers, they were -- you remember -- a thoroughly mixed lot, and caused Colonel Jones-Williams a deal of trouble, what with affiliation orders, bringing women into the Camp, complaints of dud cheques from tradesmen, etc.

Houdini came wearing two Boer War ribbons. The Adjutant didn't question them, but they made some of us very suspicious. He claimed to have served in South Africa with the City Imperial Volunteers, but when Jock Wilson, who won a D.C.M. with the same corps in 1900, cross-examined him about the various engagements in which they'd taken part, and about their officers, Houdini could remember nothing. He'd been kicked on the head by a mule, he said, just before the Cease-Fire sounded, and his war memories had faded completely from his mind. We began to wonder how the hell Houdini had got a commission, because he knew no more drill than he could have picked up in the Boys' Brigade. And with what regiment, if any, had he served since the war started? He claimed to have been a despatch rider during the Retreat, and carried his left arm as though he'd been wounded in the shoulder. I reckon that Houdini Cashman, with his cissy manner, simpering through his ingrowing moustache, and sitting cross-legged like a Buddha on the floor of his hut, was the queerest fish in the entire British Army.

Most of us felt some sympathy for true-blue Bible-punching Conchies, who quoted the Sixth Commandment at the tribunals, and damn well meant it -- what we couldn't stand were dirty yellow-bellied column-dodgers of the Cashman type, who banked on being safer in the Army than out, if they played their cards properly -- and Houdini Cashman had his tunic sleeves stuffed with aces. Literally, as well as in a manner of speaking, because a deck of fake cards was his principal stockin-trade. He'd nearly dug himself in at the Depôt as Assistant Musketry Officer, on the strength of his ribbons, having ingratiated himself with old Major Floods by his usual thimble-rigging tricks, when Jock Wilson called on the Adjutant. 'Willie,' he said, 'that Cashman fellow's a wrong 'un. You'd be wise to put him on the next draft before worse befalls us. And in case the stinker goes sick, as I think he will, be sure to warn the M.O. beforehand.'

So Houdini found himself at Rouen Base Camp soon afterwards, on the same draft as myself -- ten officers and two hundred men. You'll remember Captain Sassoon's lines:

When I am old and bald and short of breath

I'll live with scarlet Majors at the Base

And speed glum heroes up the Line to Death:

You'll see me with my puffy, petulant face

Gulping and guzzling at the best hotels...

In my opinion, Houdini must have inspired that poem! At Rouen, he followed much the same procedure as had nearly proved successful at the Depôt. He gave a conjuring gaff in the Y.M.C.A. hut -- Magic Circle stuff, almost up to Maskelyne's show at the Egyptian Hall, though he hadn't the requisite mirrors and gear. Then he sucked up to the Commandant, Major Charlie Short (Sir Wm. Short's brother) by letting him spot the right card every time where everyone else failed -- and by making a fool of Captain Hotson of the South Wales Borderers, whom he knew Major Short disliked. In a mind-reading and fortune-telling turn, Houdini told the audience: 'I've lost a photograph of Gigi, my French fiancée. The cards inform me that someone present has it in his wallet.' Major Short smilingly inquired whom the cards suspected. Houdini tapped the knave of hearts. 'It's that Captain sitting in the corner,' he said. So the Major asked Hotson if he would produce his wallet and open it. Hotson said: 'Of course!' and pulled it out. There he found a postcard of a great buxom French nude with 'From Gigi to her darling Monsieur Victor!' scrawled across the back in violet ink. You should have seen Hotson's face when Houdini displayed the card to the front rows!

Invited to dine that night at H.Q. Mess, Houdini brought the conversation round to a party of deserters, said to be ensconced in a wood near the Camp, and living by armed raids on our transport. Four thousand of our chaps would be beating the wood next day, strung out at a few paces' interval, with Major Short in charge. Houdini remarked: 'I've no doubt that you'll catch those toughs, sir; but be careful with them afterwards. They're all old lags, so they'll probably be able to slide out of a pair of Army handcuffs in just one minute.'

'Nothing wrong with our handcuffs,' barked the Major. 'You try and get out of a pair, my friend! I'll bet a hundred francs you can't do it in five minutes, let alone one.'

'If they're ordinary Army handcuffs, I'm willing to risk the bet,' says Houdini.

I happened to be invited too that night, having known Major Short, J.P., all my life. As the squire of Llanfihangel, my native village, he recommended me for my commission in September 1914. Let me confess that Houdini was using me as his confederate. One of my tasks had been to hold Hotson in conversation at the shower baths, just before dinner, while Houdini planted the postcard in his wallet. Half Houdini's tricks depended on a confederate, and I was the last person anyone would suspect of associating with such a crummy character. It beats me, in fact, why I ever took on the job!

When the port came round, Major Short sent for the Provost-sergeant, and said: 'A

pair of handcuffs, Sergeant! I'm about to put one of the officers here under close arrest.' The Provost-sergeant saluted smartly and marched out again. I was watching whether he would let his eye stray for a moment in Houdini's direction, but since he didn't, I don't know to this day whether he was in the know: I mean, whether what he brought back -- perhaps just a little too promptly -- were a pair of trick handcuffs, or the real thing.

Major Short led Houdini into the middle of the mess-room and announced: 'Gentlemen, this officer has cast grave doubts on the efficiency of our handcuffs. We've agreed that if he can't release himself within five minutes from this regulation pair, he'll wear them until reveille tomorrow.'

Houdini answered in his prissiest tones: 'Fair's fair, sir. But if I succeed, everyone here will see how it's done, and the news will soon get around. For the sake of good order and discipline, I suggest you put a screen around me.'

Major Short agreed and sent for the screen. Then he snapped the bracelets on Houdini's wrists from behind. 'Ready, now?'

'Ready, sir!'

I noticed a skylight above the screen, and quietly slipped out of the mess, set a handy fire-ladder against the wall, climbed on the roof and peeped down. Houdini was shaping to wriggle his fat bottom through his arms when he spotted me. 'Stop!' he squealed. 'There's a Peeping Tom up there!' I shinned down the ladder in double-quick time and stowed it back where I'd found it, before returning. 'That makes one minute, Mr Cashman,' said Major Short, as he studied his gold half-hunter, 'but I'll let you have an extra ten seconds because of the interruption.'

'Thank you, sir, but I don't need it,' simpered Houdini, as he emerged smiling from behind the screen and presented the handcuffs to the Major.

'A hundred francs, wasn't it?' asked the Major glumly, taking out his wallet. Then his face went purple at finding the same nude lurking among the larger notes.

'No need to settle at once, sir. What about a double or quits? I'll handcuff Captain Hotson, or anyone else you care to name, and if he can slip the bracelets in five minutes no money changes hands.' Houdini didn't refer even obscurely to the postcard; which was tact, and not far short of blackmail.

Hotson declined the honour: 'I never did time in Parkhurst or Princetown, where one learns these things.'

To show he was a good sport, Houdini joined in the laughter against him and -- would

you believe it? -- the next morning he came on parade mounted! The Commandant had made him Assistant Adjutant. And I'm damned if that same evening Houdini didn't read out the roll of officers and men due to entrain for the Line!

You win, Houdini! A very fine performance! No blood sports on Pilckem Ridge for you, no free-for-all tussles with Jerry in salubrious Langemarck, no mudlarking in the airy shell-craters of Passchendaele. Your job from now on is to 'speed glum heroes up the Line to Death.' 'Bonjour et bonne chance, cher Monsieur Victor!'

When Winnie Churchill lost his job at Whitehall as a result of the Dardanelles mess, he volunteered for the trenches and for a while commanded the 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers. We relieved them once on the Somme. Then his friends at the War House, afraid that he might collect too much glory, broke up the battalion. Winnie reappeared in Parliament, and you may remember that debate on combing out more civilians from jobs which could be held by women and disabled ex-servicemen, because the Army needed cannon-fodder. Winnie made a speech saying that hundreds of thousands of able-bodied men already in the Forces were being kept behind the lines on useless jobs. He turned the Gospel verse 'Physician, heal thyself!' into 'Physician, comb thyself!' This had some effect. A few young, red-tabbed pimps from Army H.Q., for example, were moved up as far as Divisional H.Q.; also A.1 men were taken off road repair and replaced by B.1's; but that was about all. At Rouen, Houdini kept his charger and increased his hold on Major Charlie Short.

I got hit twice more, once at Langemarck in September 1917; and again in February 1918, while marching up the pavé towards Messines. Each time, when I rejoined the Battalion by way of Rouen, there was Houdini as large as life and a great deal uglier. He now wore a wound stripe, also three stars, which were more than I ever collected. Though several times in temporary command of a company -- and once of the Battalion, when everyone else got knocked out -- I was always superseded just before reaching acting rank. A subaltern I would die, that was clear! Nor did I collect any decorations.

Came the summer of 1918. It was 'Backs to the Wall!' Old Ludendorff had driven our gallant allies, the Pork-and-Beans, out of the Neuve-Chapelle sector, bust the line wide open, and forced Butcher Haig to evacuate the whole Ypres salient. Then he pushed the French off the Chemin des Dames, and if the Yanks hadn't come up just in time, and held him at Château-Thierry, he'd have goose-stepped into Paris, and that would have been that!

At home, they raised the military age, and combed away for dear life. Down by the Somme, we waited at Stand-to every morning for the biggest, bloodiest Boche barrage ever, that would blast Ludendorff's way clear to Amiens. The wind was up, vertically, with a whiff of panic even in the bumph that the brass-hats circulated from their cosy châteaux. In fact, things must have looked pretty desperate down at Rouen because,

one evening, who should stumble into our Company dug-out at Beaumont-Hamel, but Captain V. Cashman!

Jock Wilson was commanding 'B' Company; he'd lost three lunchhooks and was full of odd pieces of metal, but still ticking. The dour old bird, by the way, had been engineer at the Blaenau-Ffestiniog slate quarries before the war, and spoke a glorious Merionethshire Welsh, which endeared him to the troops. He picked up the field telephone and at once rang Battalion, insisting that Houdini should take down two of his three stars (acting rank only). The Colonel saw the point. If Jock got scuppered, Houdini would be left in charge of the company, though not having hitherto muddied his boots in shell-hole or sump-pit, and knowing cooch nay about trench warfare.

Jock's own military value had sunk by this time. Scots are pretty good drinkers, born with two livers and a spare set of kidneys; but this one had reached the three-bottles-a-day stage. In point of fact, he was almost a passenger, and left the running of the company to me and young Stack. Jock needed a spot of leave to set him up again. He'd been sweating on that for months, but to no avail. His only hope now was another wound, preferably not either in the head or stomach.

A sequence of barrages had played hell with the Beaumont-Hamel trench system. But at least it wasn't yet a row of shell-craters sketchily joined together with a few hurried scrapes of an entrenching tool, as at Passchendaele and elsewhere. We 'B' officers even sat down to dinner that night at a small table, in an at least pip-squeak-proof dug-out, and each had a solid ammunition box under him. Young Stack was on duty, which left Jock, Houdini and me to eat our stew together.

Well, you know how it is with beasts when they're scared: most species have only one way of facing danger. Cats enhance themselves into great spitting furies; rabbits scud off; bulls lower their horns and charge; some insects and reptiles sham dead. Houdini was properly scared, but neither enhanced himself, nor scudded off, nor charged, nor shammed dead. Instead, he started on his usual stunts, in the pathetic hope, I suppose, of softening Jock's heart and wrangling himself a cushy job as Company Entertainments Officer. Psychologically very interesting, I suppose, if I'd happened to be a psychologist, which I wasn't.

He put a fist into his mouth and planked down on the table beside me a complete set of dentures, joined by a spring. As he removed his hand, they sprang open. Jock's face was as red as the side of a Cuinchy brick-stack, and his eyes bloodshot and unwinking. He'd seemed almost unaware of Houdini's presence, except that his jowls hung heavy with dislike; but now they stirred slightly. 'Take that damned animal away!' he growled.

Houdini pushed the set in his pocket, smiling feebly.

'Keep it there!' said Jock. 'And button up the flap!'

Since, a few seconds later, Houdini was munching away at ration-biscuit, I conclude either that the comic dentures had not originally come from his mouth, or that he hadn't really put them back in his pocket. Between mouthfuls, he palmed my knife and fork; produced an egg from my gas-mask case; wrapped a tumbler in a piece of newspaper and smashed it with a blow of his revolver -- but the tumbler wasn't inside after all; and kept up the fun for about twenty minutes. Neither Jock nor I made a single comment. Maybe Houdini took this for a respectful hush of awe, but pausing at last and looking expectantly at Jock's face, he found it as impassive as a Jubilee statue of Queen Victoria. No flicker of interest. Suddenly Jock turned to me and said in Welsh: 'Dan bach, take this toad away before he does something clever with his bloody navel!' So I took Houdini along to relieve young Stack, whom we found at Left Post.

Left Post hung in the air; the Borderers had abandoned their suicidal front-line trenches and were holding a position parallel to us, fifty yards back. Young Stack gave Houdini his orders. 'You're to stay here until relieved. Keep the troops on their toes. Take an occasional tour of the company frontage. And don't use the telephone except in an emergency. "Emergency" means when Jerry's barrage drops.'

'You can forget about the telephone,' I interrupted. 'When the barrage drops, there'll be no need to announce the fact -- it'll be audible in Calais, Dover and Whitehall. Besides, in two minutes we'll all be wiped out. Dead men don't phone.'

I couldn't see in the darkness how Houdini had reacted to this information. It was a quiet night. 'Suspiciously quiet,' said young Stack, taking his cue from me. 'That's typical of Ludendorff. He doesn't want to give his hand away, so he orders quiet. But these Jerries are too damned thorough. There should at least be normal activity if they want to pretend that this is a normal night, and not the night.'

Sergeant Foster, commanding No. 1 platoon, winked at me, and contributed his bit. 'Not a Verey Light for hours, sir. It's coming, for sure!'

Houdini had already squeezed into the Post cubbyhole, but we went on chatting outside.

'Good night, Sergeant,' I said. 'Look after Mr Cashman. He's an old soldier, but he's seen no action since Mafeking, and this isn't the sunny South African veldt.'

'Not "good night," sir! It's "goodbye"!'

On getting back to Company H.Q., I found myself in command. Jock hadn't been killed, wounded or even carried off by an attack of D.T.'s. His leave had miraculously come through, and off he'd buzzed, in too much of a hurry even to finish his third bottle of

whisky, which he's just opened when the news arrived.

Twenty-four hours went by before I revisited Left Post. I had to keep close to the phone, and trips to either flank were pretty dangerous by daylight. Also, I'd lost young Stack -- lent to 'C' Company, two of whose officers had been killed by the same shell. But he came home to us that night, when someone was sent to relieve him.

Dinnertime, and no Houdini. 'I'm disappointed, Dan,' says young Stack. 'My batman tells me you had a buckshee conjuring show last night.'

'We can command a repeat performance,' I suggested.

Still no Houdini. Then a runner arrives with a verbal message from Sergeant Foster. 'Rum shortage: will the Company Commander be good enough to inspect Left Post as soon as convenient?'

I asked Ought-Three Davies, the runner: 'Where's the new officer, my lad?'

'Haven't seen a sign of the gentleman, sir.'

Young Stack took over the phone, while I went up to reconnoitre. 'If the C.O. wants to know where I am, say I'm investigating a report of trouble near Left Post.'

Sergeant Foster wore a grim look as he jerked his head towards the cubbyhole. 'The new officer's been out but once, sir, since you left; and then only for a certain purpose.'

'Right, Sergeant. Let's dislodge him!'

I squeezed in, and shone a pocket torch around. A two gallon rum jar lay on its side in the middle of the floor. I handed it back to the Sergeant.

'Not a drop left, sir.'

Houdini huddled on some sandbags in the far corner, watching me. How queer he looked! Ingrowing moustache meeting two days of blue stubble, and his eyes like currants in a half-cooked suet pudding.

I could get nothing into Houdini, or out of him. He crouched there, making whining noises, for all the world like a puppy that's been caught misbehaving in the best parlour.

'Goddam that fellow! Turn your back, please, Sergeant, while I give him the pasting of his life. I don't want witnesses.' But when I came closer, Houdini squealed. It was a

terrible noise that ran down my spine and churned my bowels.

I came out again, regretting that the rum jar was empty. 'He'll not get away with this lot,' I said. 'I'm going down to Battalion H.Q. Set a sentry on him, Sergeant!'

So I pushed off, stopping only to put young Stack in charge of the telephone. But soon I barged into Barney, our new Medical Officer, who had graduated from Trinity College, Dublin, two months before, and still found the war a great joke.

'Begob! Ye look as though yer heart's throubled and sore,' he said in the exaggerated stage-Irish he used for our amusement.

I unloaded on him. 'Ah, so 'tis like that, is it?' says Barney. 'Let's be taking a sly peep at the poor divil.'

Back with Barney to Left Post. Barney put his head into the cubbyhole, then slowly shook it in wonder and admiration: 'Holy Mother of God, 'tis powerful drunk he is!'

But when I let myself go on the subject of Houdini in plain English, Welsh, and other languages, Barney got the point. 'Very well, Dan,' he said soberly, 'I'll go down to Battalion myself. Trust me to save awkward questions. It won't do anybody any good if you bring a charge against the bastard.'

Barney was right. The C.O. would appreciate my silence, and keep the case dark. What with young Howland, who had deserted off leave and barely escaped the firing squad, and Lance-corporal Peters, the one who murdered an estaminet-keeper, and the Sergeant Phillips scandal, we'd had more than our plateful of notoriety in recent months.

I let Barney have his way, and that was the last I ever saw of Houdini; for the Adjutant smuggled him down the line in an ambulance, without even informing me that he'd gone.

'You win, Houdini!' But the magnitude of his victory did not appear until Jock returned off leave. Jock had stopped at Rouen to replenish his whisky store, and whom should he meet in the main square but Houdini! Once more a captain, and in the saddle again. Houdini explained that he'd been invalided back as a food-poisoning case, and written to Major Short from No. 2 Red Cross Hospital. The Major, it seems, was delighted, because Houdini had been giving him lessons in trick shuffling and trick dealing -- guaranteed to fascinate an indefatigable bridge-player who had once lost a packet to some sharpers on an Atlantic voyage.

Jock didn't know the facts of the story until he got them from Barney and me. And even if he'd known, what could he have done to upset Houdini's apple-cart? Officially, it was

food-poisoning!

More posh dinners for you, Houdini, at the Couronne and the Fleur de Lys; but for Jock and young Stack and me the glories of the wading of the Ancre, and the hundred days from Albert to Maubeuge. Ludendorff had shot his bolt, and it was our turn again. Near Maubeuge, Jock succumbed at last to a spent machine-gun bullet that entered his temple -- not very deeply, but deep enough -- as we bivouacked in a plum orchard. He was asleep, and nobody knew a thing about it until next morning.

In November came the eerie Armistice; then a lot of square-pushing and shining up of brasses, and education courses, and other morale-raising employment.

The day after I got demobbed, I picked up the Daily Mail, and read:

OFFICER ABSCONDS WITH COMPANY CASH. ARRESTED AT LIVERPOOL. AWARDED TWO YEARS' HARD LABOUR.

But you write that Houdini got clear away to the States. He must have slipped his handcuffs; which makes me think that those he used at Rouen weren't trick ones.

I don't know how or when he went to Australia, or what his activities were in the long gap between 1919 and 1958; but I can tell you how he ended. While serving a ten-year stretch for fraud, he was made a 'trusty', and endeared himself to the Prison Governor 'by his remarkable talents as a conjurer'. The Governor, in fact, managed to get the last four years of his sentence remitted for good conduct. You win again, Houdini!

But this time his victory was short-lived. The day before he should have been freed, they found him in the Prison Library with his throat cut by the jagged edge of a dinner plate. R.I.P.!

With good wishes and more apologies

for the length of this screed,

very sincerely yours,

DANIEL EDWARDS

(late R.W.F.)