

From *Houdini's Flight*: A Novel in Progress

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Weiss opened his Sydney season at Rickards' Tivoli Theatre on April 10th. The first few evenings had gone well enough, although he felt himself to be in not especially good form. Something was missing, something making it hard for him to reach across to his audiences. After a few of those early shows he told Bess one morning, 'I think I know what's the matter. I think it's that I'm not seeing the people in this town. I don't know who they are.'

Finding it hard to see the connection, Bess had replied, 'See the people? You can see them in the street any time you like.'

'That's not what I mean. What I mean is, you don't get to know anybody until you've seen them in their troubles, do you?'

But then she had understood. 'People and their troubles' was something her husband always brought up when he had one of his charity shows in mind.

And so it was to be.

Eleven days after his first performance in Sydney, he made the short trip from the city to Callan Park Hospital for the Insane. It was situated at Rozelle, a close-in suburb towards the west, and was boasted to be the largest asylum in the Southern Hemisphere.

For an outdoor show like this, he could not have asked for a finer morning. He was seated on a wooden chair in the exercise yard of Ward 21. He had closed his eyes and was drifting, falling, down into that quiet place inside him he liked to visit before such a trial as would soon follow. On his own at one end of the yard, he was also waiting for them to bring him the straitjacket for which he'd asked, having previously explained to those in charge it would be better for him to be on his own like this for the purpose of the effect, as if meaning the theatrical effect. What he had in mind though was something else.

Opening his eyes again, he looked towards the ranks of inmates assembled before him. He glanced from face to face, tried to hold this or that individual's gaze for a few moments, smiled at them. But this with only a few; most were beyond such contact. Such suffering humanity, he felt the pity of it all. They were not treated badly in this

place, and the evidence suggested this was so. He had been to places where the patients had been dressed in rags, were filthy, or clearly hungry. That was not the case here, from what he could see. If only it was possible to tend to their souls in such ways as well.

Watched over by an orderly, a small, very thin man was walking a tiny circle to one side of the main group. Another, leaning his forehead against the yard wall, arms stretched up over his head, was banging his palms on the stonework.

Here, as in the dozen other asylums he had visited, he asked himself again how this had come to pass. Who or what had hurt these men and women so? These thirty or more of God's children into whose lives he fervently wished he could now bring some ... What? He could not explain what it was, but just knew that it was important for him to do this.

It had been a habit of his, for six or seven years past, to give performances for the unfortunate. Orphanages, homes for destitute men, but lunatic asylums most of all. And in each of these he had received the reassurance that it had been worth the while—from Hamburg to Edinburgh to New York, they had clapped or cheered or roared, cried with elation, smiled, laughed. But each place was different and who could tell how he would be received here.

Certainly, he'd had no trouble convincing the authorities to allow the test he proposed. A straitjacket of their choice, to be fitted to him by the strongest attendants they could find.

There was some commotion at the back of his audience. Shifting to one side or the other at the bidding of the attendants, they were making way, he now saw, for a small group to come through—the Superintendent, Dr Ogilvie, whom he'd met earlier, and another three orderlies. And one of these men had, neatly folded under his arm, the item he had requested. Though half-hidden, he had no difficulty picking the dreadful thing for what it was; there was no mistaking those brass buckles and loose-hanging straps.

When these men stopped—awkwardly and too far away, as if they didn't know how close they should approach him—Weiss stood and beckoned them closer. Directing his words partly towards the inmates, partly towards the Superintendent, he spoke loudly, in his usual serious, unshowmanlike tones. 'May I have your attention please ...'

He was patient, knew well that some of these cases needed time to collect their attention, such as it was; others, meanwhile, had to be prodded, or turned, in the right direction.

'Thank you, thank you all ... I would like to say to you, before

the little show I have for you here today, that I have learned, going around the world as I do, that some good people don't always have the chance to see me ... ' He paused, smiled gently at them before continuing. 'I guess some of you gentlemen would be in that position ... '

He heard a few titters—and not only from the staff. He was not surprised. What was crazy, what wasn't, was a question he had often meditated upon. This laughing at themselves was a phenomenon he'd encountered in other such institutions. It was a kind of laughter he had always found deeply comforting.

'So dear friends, for your benefit, I will now attempt to demonstrate to you that nothing is impossible ... If some of you didn't hear me I'll say it again, loud and clear—*nothing*, is impossible ... Enough for now, oh, except that I hope you enjoy what you are about to see, and get well soon everybody!'

There were laughs again—of a different and mixed kind this time—and some howls, some cries. But neither was this any surprise to him.

He turned to the Superintendent and said quietly, 'Thank you for allowing this, sir.'

'My pleasure,' was the reply. Uncertain though benign, Weiss would have said. Ogilvie then added, 'I wouldn't miss the opportunity myself! It's not every day one gets to see someone famous like you,' and confirmed the view Weiss had been forming of him. You could not do what he was about to do without the cooperation of the top man in these institutions; and he had come to be able to tell within a minute of walking into their office. With this one, it had probably taken less.

'I hope I don't disappoint you then,' Weiss said. He then summoned the orderlies closer, addressed them generally with a 'Hello fellers,' and after shook each one by the hand. 'Ordinarily,' he spoke to them again as a group, 'I would ask my own assistant to help me with this—you can see him over there watching what we do so don't let's disappoint him!—but I've heard you Australian boys are good and strong ... Is that right?'

Weiss waited for someone to respond, except none appeared to have anything to say. He did notice, however, that the tallest of them, a red-haired kid of no more than twenty, had adopted a very sardonic expression. Surly almost, considering the curl to his lip. Weiss looked directly into his eyes, and when he did not look away, knew he would be the one. 'You sir,' he said loudly. 'You look pretty strong. How

about doing the honours? Your friends can finish the job ... '

The one he had addressed showed no hesitation in coming forward. After him, nor did any of the others.

Weiss now held his arms out in front to allow them to begin. 'What's your name?' he asked the redhead, as he began pulling the jacket sleeves onto his arms.

'Stan Morgan,' he replied.

But now this Morgan was taking trouble, Weiss saw, to avoid his gaze. At the same time as he was taking trouble to strap him in as tightly as he possibly could. He could feel from the way this orderly was tugging and pulling to gain an extra notch here and there, that he meant business.

The kid couldn't have known that he could just as easily jump over the moon as restrain the great Houdini. He had not seen, in his eagerness and cockiness, that the man had flexed and expanded, imperceptibly, slowly, the muscles of his chest and upper arms, neck and shoulders. Whatever was fitted to him in this state, there was always slack to be gained by his simply untensing.

Weiss also knew that his sheer strength would be a foreign quantity, a surprise, to such a little shaver as this. And in such an escape, strength was the main tool. But for the slight slack achieved earlier, there was no other strategy. He had kept up his exercise regime on the boat. Running on the spot, pushups, skipping rope at least four hundred times each day, were the basics, but there were many other specialised routines as well. Being only 5'6", his tormentors normally towered over him—as was the case today—but Weiss was almost as wide as he was tall and had the upper body power of a bullock.

He was ready. Always was, always would be. Ready to muscle his way out.

He began with the breathing out, slow and steady.

Four, five inhalations and exhalations, and he could feel a little give at the point of his left elbow. That found, he paused for a moment to smile and wink at his audience. They were almost all of them watching him now in attentive silence, as if the man had an answer, the single most important answer, to the question of their anguish.

They couldn't know yet, but he was well along the path to release. For that was all it ever took—a small space, an angle, something to push against, and he was on his way.

What was needed next was brute force, and of that he had plenty. Despite beginning the struggle with the fingers of his left hand splayed

out behind his right armpit, inside five minutes he had his left arm entirely free of its sleeve, though still imprisoned by the body of the jacket.

Some of those at the front had an inkling he was making progress; Weiss could hear indistinct mutters coming from among them. Meanwhile, he was sure he also heard something very like a snort coming from the orderlies behind him. The patients gave him heart, the others brought out his anger, but each merely served to spur him on: he tried even harder. Further pushing and pulling and the other arm was free also. After that, he was able to loosen the lower straps around his waist and begin the final manoeuvre—inching the jacket up over his head.

With one last effort, he had the dreadful thing off, shouted 'Ha!' and waved it over his head.

At this there were gasps, shouts of joy, laughter both manic and natural. All that he could ever wish to hear. These poor men knew; they could acknowledge the struggle, if any could, and he loved them for that. And a struggle it had certainly been. He checked his watch and saw the whole thing had taken him fully eleven minutes. Panting and bathed in sweat, he signalled to Kukol who, ever-ready, immediately rushed over to him with a towel.

Superintendent Ogilvie, shaking his head in disbelief, came up to squeeze his hand. But not everyone was impressed. In a quiet voice, though clearly enough for everyone in this small group to pick up, Morgan now proclaimed, 'Tosh, he's worked out some way to do it, that's all.'

Weiss swung around to face him. 'You are correct there, young Mr Morgan.'

Morgan ignored him, going on to speak to one of the other orderlies instead. 'Don't know what the fuss is about. It's only a silly old straitjacket besides.'

Weiss did not like what he had heard. A long time had passed since anybody had insulted him so directly. He raised his voice. 'I don't believe some of your people here would agree with you,' he said, sweeping an arm towards the inmates.

Morgan, rising in courage with each passing second, now responded to him directly. 'Them? What would they know? Look ...' he said, nodding past Weiss.

His audience had begun to fall apart, some drifting off in haphazard directions, others being helped away by staff. 'Shows you how much *they* care,' Morgan added.

The surly expression that wouldn't leave this kid's face was enough to tip Weiss over. In what was almost a shout, he addressed this junior attendant as if he represented the sum of a mythical assembly.

'All right. I have been told that what I have done was easy! Nothing to it! Only a straitjacket! I'm afraid where I come from that counts as a challenge ... Well Houdini will never say no to a challenge ... Indeed, he issues one in return ... '

The same fury he had felt that morning a few days ago at the asylum was welling up again in him here. They were at the very moment trying to ensnare him again, those same people, those lunacy attendants who were once more led by their hero Morgan.

On this theatre stage, and in full view of the patrons, he had managed to stay calm through all the indignities committed upon him so far. Calm, while they had bandaged his hands to his sides. Calm too while they rolled him in three large sheets on the floor, then transferred him to the iron hospital bed on which he presently lay. Calm, while they tied him to the same bed with strong linen bandages. And still calm while they slowly poured fourteen buckets of water over his form—to shrink all the material and knots and to hold him in what they reckoned was a positively helpless condition ...

They had misjudged him, oh they had misjudged him. But he was used to that—people had done the same with him all his life. Tried to diminish him, hold him back. Not that it mattered any longer: he had shown them then, he would show them now. They did not know him but, as they went about their work, he had got to know them like they couldn't ever know themselves. His art had allowed him to look into men's hearts; from the malice with which a rope was pulled against his flesh, he could read the man, same as he could when they tested a chain around his neck, or hammered far more than was necessary the nails into a coffin from which he must escape.

Although he would allow none of these to see, he was burning inside. With these too, as they had gone about their infamous business, he had felt the malice and the hatred of little men; whatever they were capable of, it was the work of shrivelled spirits and puny souls.

Little did they know that he too was perfectly capable of shrivelling. But not in their way. Only as a prelude to a great outflowing, a great swelling of his own spirit, that thing so fundamental to his setting himself free. And whether it was to be in Sydney, Australia or London, England he knew what he had to do to set himself free of this mean world. And he would achieve his freedom in the face of doubt, spite,

or mockery, in a theatre, music hall, opera house, or any other place anyone cared to name.

Weiss, on this night at the bottom of the world, would attempt to rid himself of human bondage, as of every other kind into which he had ever been fitted.

Which is what he did, again, tonight. It had taken him over an hour and a quarter and had left him barely able to walk offstage. So tired was he, he was barely conscious of anyone or anything beyond the footlights. If he could hear, the audience's muted, uncertain response did not register. How could they know what to make of what they had seen? This was not a performance they had witnessed, some routine illusion or stage magic, but a man wrestling with something demonic. This was not, most definitely not, an entertainment.