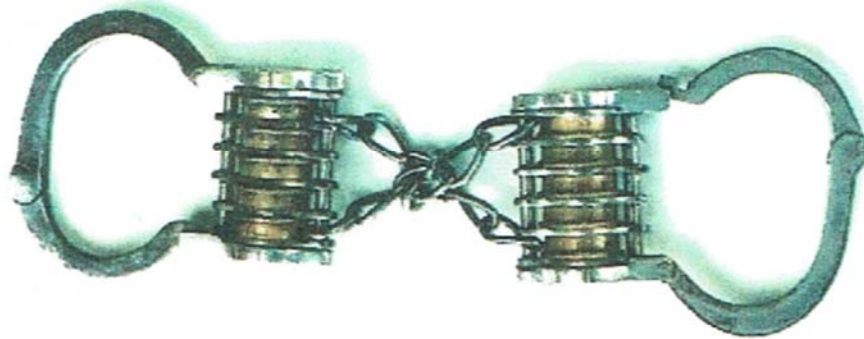


# Houdini vs. Kleppini

The Story of the French

Cuff with Letterlocks



John Bushey

2011

# Houdini vs. Kleppini:

The Story of the French

Cuff with Letterlocks

#6 of 6  
Limited edition  
Best wishes  
John Bushey

By John Bushey

2011

## French Cuff with Letterlock

The mere name Harry Houdini still conjures up images of amazing escapes and the days of a vaudeville master. He is still considered one of the world's greatest magicians and escape artists. Throughout Houdini's earlier career he had hundreds of publicity photographs taken. It is now known that there were at least five handcuffs, which were unique in the world of handcuffs. Pat Culliton called these the "Super Cuffs" in his most recent book *Houdini The Key*. Copies still may be available, and I cannot express strongly enough that every historian of escapes and Houdini simply MUST have this book. My sincere thanks to Patrick Culliton "Houdini's Ghost", for his lifetime of devotion and research on Harry Houdini and everything connected with Harry. If he still has copies left I advise buying one soon. Only 278 were printed (Houdini's address was 278 W. 113<sup>th</sup> street, NY., so hence the number printed.

The super cuffs were the Mirror Handcuff, Hungarian Handcuff, French Lettercuff, Bell-lock Handcuff, and the Russian Manacle. Much information has come to light in recent years as historians research Houdini and these handcuffs more thoroughly than ever done before. This manuscript will compile what is known about one of those handcuffs. It is one of two known handcuffs which use a combination lock. I speak of the French Cuff with Letterlock, as Houdini called it. The French Lettercuff.

The Mirror handcuff was used in a challenge by the London Daily Mirror Newspaper in 1904. It garnered much publicity for Houdini, and the account of this incredible challenge was used in many of his early pitchbooks, and again in many biographies about Houdini. It, along with the Silver replica, is now in the David Copperfield Collection. The Hungarian handcuff, more commonly known today as the

“Séance Cuff”, because the current owner, Sidney Radner, has used it each year at the annual Houdini Séance. It rests on the séance table each and every year. The Bell-Lock handcuff is seen on Houdini in several early photographs, but its current whereabouts is unknown. It was still in the Houdini home after Bessie sold it, and the new home-owner purportedly used it to pay a plumber doing work at the house. The Russian Manacle was also used in several early photographs, and is currently in the S.A.M. museum in California. It is on a display board with several other restraints. It still has the original key, but the keyhole cover has been lost somewhere over the years. This board is put together, and underneath the covering are newspapers all with 1936 dates. It is thought that Bessie put this board together for the Ten-year Anniversary séance, her last, in attempts to contact Houdini. The board was then donated to the Society of American Magicians. The French Cuff with Letterlock was given to magician and collector Jon Oliver, who still owns this rare piece of Houdini history. Ian McColl wrote to Jon in the 1980’s asking about the handcuff but did not immediately receive a reply.

Eventually, Jon did contact Ian, and with permission from Jon and surviving members of the Houdini family, Ian received permission to reproduce the handcuff. Jon sent him impressions of the handcuff, measurements, and information he had about the restraint. Ian made 26 reproductions of the French Lettercuff, and they originally sold for \$1250. They are now sold out. To my knowledge, only one of those has ever been offered for sale outside the original sale. Of all of Ian McColl’s brilliant work and creations this is one of his masterpieces.

The original French Lettercuff was given to Jon Oliver by Houdini’s great niece, Ruth Hinson. Ian wrote to Jon again in 1995, and this time Jon replied. Jon was careful and discussed reproducing this handcuff with members of Houdini’s family.

Both Jon and Ruth Hinson agreed to allow the handcuff to be reproduced. While the handcuff was expensive, no one made a great deal of money from this venture. The handcuff is complicated with many parts, and because Mr. McColl used the lost-wax method of casting parts the up-front cost was enormous. Two conditions were set in order for Ian to reproduce the handcuff. One, whoever made them they had to be a true craftsman – and we all know Ian to be a master of his craft. The second condition was that with everyone constantly trying to expose the secrets of Houdini, Ruth and Jon did not want the original combination Houdini's handcuff was set on to be released.

Jon himself first saw the French lettercuffs in 1986 while he was visiting Ruth Hinson. After dinner he dropped her off and she asked him if he'd like to see a handcuff. Jon's jaw nearly hit the floor when he saw what handcuff Ruth wanted to show him. The handcuffs were given to Jon a few years later. So that is how they got to their current owner, and how Ian came to reproduce them.

My goal here is to compile what is known about this famous handcuff. I will begin with the original Houdini story. It is one of those stories so fantastic that you just want to believe it. I retyped verbatim the chapter from Houdini's book *Handcuff Secrets*, published by Routledge in 1910. Two editions of this book exist; one a hard-cover with a yellow cover, and the other a soft-cover with a light bluish color. The book also exists in a 1909 edition combined with Houdini's book *The Unmasking of Robert Houdin*. Enjoy Houdini's story of the French Cuff with Letterlock.

# Handcuff Secrets (page 42)

## Chapter VI

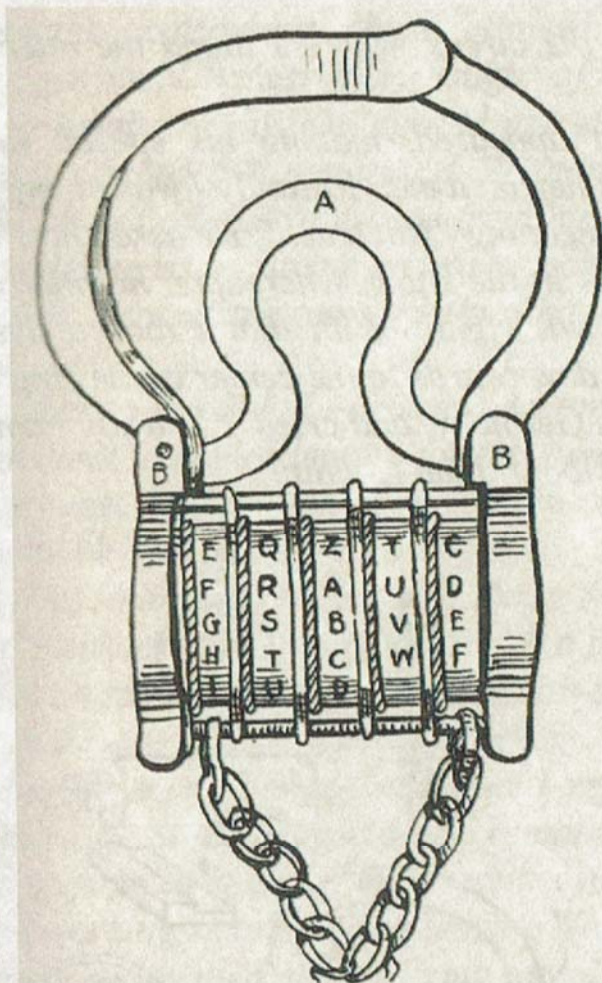
### FRENCH LETTER CUFF

*To open the French letter lock (see page 43) get a strong spring, insert it between the two ends of the cuff at BB in the illustration, which will keep both ends on a tension all the time, and gradually move the letters until you hear a slight click. This you continue to do, until all the letters forming the word or cipher have been found, and then the lock is automatically opened by the pressure of the spring. The finer the workmanship, the harder is the lock to open; but I have never seen any with five or six letters that I have failed to open.*

*This mention of the French letter cuff reminds me of one of the most exciting and amusing incidents of my Continental tour, which I trust will interest my readers.*

*You will recall that I mentioned an eccentric handcuff performer who calls himself Kleppini. This man, with the French letter lock, interrupted my engagement with the Circus Corty Althoff in June, 1902, and brought about one of the most interesting contests that ever fell to my lot.*

*We were touring Holland, when a friend sent me a bill and newspaper clipping, announcing in huge, fat type that Kleppini was about to appear at Circus Sidoli, in Dortmund, Germany, after returning from Holland, where he had defeated the American, Houdini, at his own game. Kleppini further claimed that I had handcuffed him, only to see him escape, while I had met with defeat when handcuffed by him.*



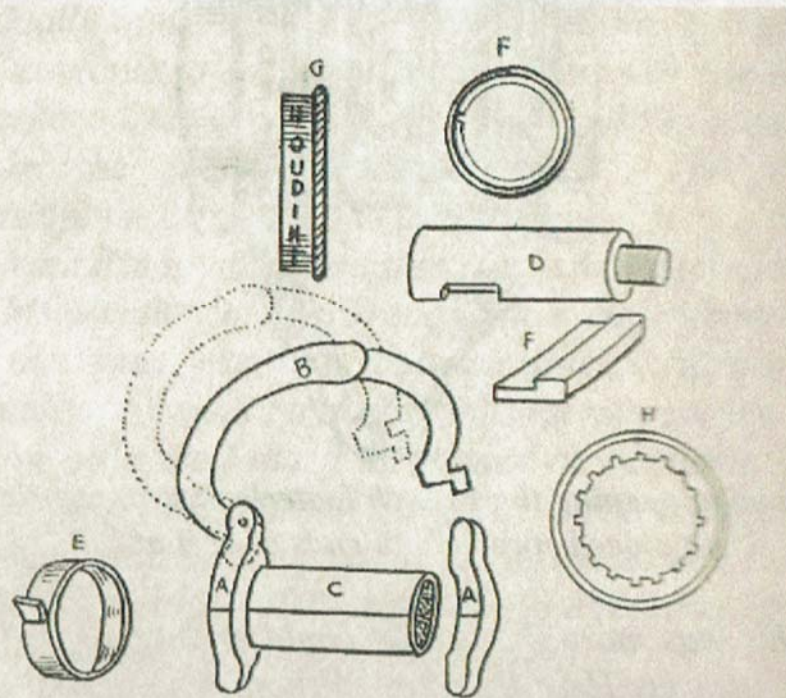
**method of opening the French Letterlock, strong spring A,  
in place between both ends of cuff at B B**

*This was more than pride could endure. I had a heated argument with my Herr Director, Althoff, who at first refused to allow me to follow up Kleppini and force him to retract; but when I said it was leave of absence or quit for good, he yielded, granted me five days' leave, and I left at once for Dortmund.*

*Arriving at Essen, a few miles distant from Dortmund, and a town where I had many good friends, I first visited a barber and had him glue a false moustache on my lip, and so fix my hair that I looked like an old man. Then with my small grip filled with "handcuff-king-defeaters," I was off to*

Dortmund and the circus, where I found the attendance very light.

Kleppini appeared, making his speech in which he claimed to have defeated me. Instantly I was on my feet, crying "Nicht wahr," meaning "Not true." He asked how I knew this, and I said I was in the know, whereupon he finally offered to wager that he was right. With that I took a flying leap of twenty-two feet downwards to the center of the ring or ménage, as it is called in Germany, and cried, "You say I am not telling the truth. Well, look! I am Houdini!"



Sections of the French Letter Cuff

*AA, ends of lock which in the illustration on page 43 are alluded to as BB; the shackle: C, The barrel portion; D, the spindle which fit in side the barrel in a movable position; E; one for the five rings: FF, side view and enlarged section of rings; G, one of the outside rings lettered; H; H, inside View of the rind G, showing showing grooves corresponding To the letters on the outside.*



*During the controversy which followed I told Kleppini and his manager what honest folk thought of performers and managers who employed misleading and untruthful advertising matter; and I offered 5000 marks if Kleppini would let me handcuff him. Also I offered to escape from his Chinese pillory. He tried to evade the issue, saying he would look me up later, but I insisted that he deposit the money before he started, as I had mine with me.*

*Herr Director Sidoli refused to make good his advertisements and to back Kleppini for the sum mentioned, so I returned to my seat, and the audience left the circus building in droves, disgusted by the misrepresentations.*

*The next morning, June 18, Herr Reutter, business manager of the circus, came to my hotel with a proposition that I should engage myself one night for a duel with Kleppini, which I refused. Herr Reutter then asked me whether I would handcuff Kleppini if the latter challenged me, and I replied that this I would certainly do. So he begged me to remain one day longer, not allowing anyone to know of my presence in town, however. As I had been working steadily since leaving New York, I was in sad need of rest, so I waited all day in my room, having all meals sent to me. On the morning of June 19 I arose with the lark-to-face huge bills announcing; "Houdini challenged and will appear at the Circus Ceasur Sidoli this evening. Kleppini will allow himself to be handcuffed and will immediately free himself."*

*I was more amused than angry. I simply polished my various handcuffs, oiled the mechanism and waited.*

*Kleppini sent for me. I refused to go to him. He called at the hotel. I would not receive him. Manager Reutter then came to me and asked me what cuffs I intended to lock on his star. I said he was at liberty to choose the cuff to be used, and the pointed to the twelve cuffs laid out for his inspection..*

*There was one pair of French letter cuffs that caught his fancy, and I permitted him to examine them closely.*

*I perceived his trick at once, and securing his promise that he would not tell Kleppini, I replied, "Clefs" which means keys. At the same time I showed him just how to work them. He fell into the trap, and asked me whether he might take these cuffs for Herr Director Sidoli to examine them before the performance, and I told him he was quite at liberty to do so, provided they were not shown to Kleppini. This promise also was given, and he departed, keeping the cuffs in his possession four hours. Of course I knew that during this time Kleppini was familiarizing himself with the cuffs, but I still had a trick up my own sleeve.*

*That night at the circus I occupied a box seat, and when Kleppini threw out his daring challenge, I entered the ring with my bag of cuffs. I said that I had no objection to his advertising his willingness to let me handcuff him, but I did object to his stating he could get out until he had made good. The audience was with me, and I told him to take his choice of the twelve cuffs. As I anticipated, he sprang like a tiger on the French letter cuff. He had taken them closed, and ran with feverish haste into his cabinet. He remained within about three minutes, whereupon I cried; "Ladies and gentlemen, do not let him tell you that the cuffs have been locked. They are open. He will return and say he opened them."*

*This brought him out of his cabinet waving the cuffs like a crazy man, and crying, "I will open these cuffs. I challenge Houdini to lock them on me. I'll show him that it is us Germans who lead the world."*

*As he had tried to cuffs in the cabinet, he was positive that he could beat them, and I was just as positive that the opposite conditions would prevail. He now started to goad me into locking them on quickly, pressing me all over the circus. So violent were my efforts, that my heart beat like a trip hammer, and my face turned pale from exertion. From this*

Kleppini gathered that I thought myself even then defeated. So he walked to the center of the ring, with the handcuffs locked upon him, and cried; "After I open these handcuffs, I will allow Madame Kleppini to open them. She is very clever in this branch of work, and she will open them in five seconds."

I smiled grimly and took the floor.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you can all go home. I do not lock a cuff on a man merely to let him escape. If he tries this cuff until doomsday, he cannot open it. To prove this, though the regular closing time of the circus is 10:30, I will allow him to remain here until 2:30."

He went into his cabinet at nine o'clock. When the big ballet feature came on at 9:30, he was not ready. At 11, almost the entire audience had gone, and Kleppini was still in his cabinet. Herr Director Sidoli became enraged, and instructed his servants to "out with Kleppini," and they lifted the cabinet up bodily and threw it over. Kleppini ran like a hunted animal into the manager's dressing room. The rest of the show might have gone on, but the audience rose as a man and went out.

At midnight, by which time I had left my place in the box, and was standing guard over the dressing-room door, I permitted Madame Kleppini to join her husband, at his request. About one o'clock the manager asked Kleppini if he would give up, and Kleppini begged me to enter the room and release him, which I refused to do without witnesses. We then sent for the Herr Director Sidoli, Herr Reutter, and a reporter. At last Kleppini said he had the word "Clefs," and I laughed.

"You are wrong. If you want to know the work which opens the lock it is just what you are—'Fraud.'"

And with this I grabbed his hands, quickly turned the letters till they spelled "fraud," and as they fell into their respective places he was feed.

*The locks, you see, were changeable, and it required only a short moment for me to change the word. When he went into the cabinet, he tried the cuff, and it responded to the word "Clefs." While locking them on him, I changed the word to "fraud," and he, even with his eagle eye, failed to recognize that he had been trapped.*

*The next day, however, being a boastful man, and unwilling to acknowledge defeat, he actually circulated bills stating that he had defeated Houdini and won 5000 marks; but the newspapers guyed him unmercifully, and published the true facts.*

#### End of chapter on the French Lettercuff

As with many of Houdini's stories, this may or may not have actually happened. Information has come to light with respect to this handcuff, and the other super cuffs. I'll start by saying that the French Cuff with Letterlock is the only super cuff used in a challenge to Houdini, and by Houdini to challenge another escape artist. This alone makes it a unique piece. The problem is that Houdini's story cannot be entirely true. In Jon Oliver's and Ian McColl's book which accompanied the reproduction French Cuff with Letterlock, entitled Fraud The Story of Houdini's French Letter Lock Handcuffs, several things came to light.

When Jon obtained the handcuff from the Houdini family, he went to the master craftsman and renowned padlock collector Bob Dix to have it opened. Bob carefully examined the handcuff and believe it or not, lubricated it with a product known as "Houdini Lube". Bob was then able to manipulate the letterlocks open. While there are five wheels, only four contain letters. The fifth wheel contains an arrow. Bob assumed this wheel, when turned slightly, held the other wheels in position so you could not accidentally "lock the handcuff" in the open position. More information on this will come later. Also, I spoke to Jon and he told me that Bob didn't think

the combination was changeable. Again, this would make the original Houdini story impossible. Speaking strictly for me, although I am a historian and enjoy learning the truth, I must admit that I was deeply disappointed that Houdini's story of Kleppini was not true. It's a story I loved to tell in lectures and performances.

Now, the French lettercuff was also used in a rare early movie made by Houdini, entitled *Merveilleux Exploits du Celebre Houdini a Paris*, done in France somewhere between 1901-1905. We have not seen the entire movie, but parts of it are well known. Houdini being chased by French police officers, and being locked in a straitjacket and escaping in full view in the cell, only to throw the jacket on the floor, bang on the door, and watching the shocked expression of the officers as they entered the cell. Also, a full view rope escape was included in this movie. Houdini, tied to a chair, wriggled and moved about quite violently, even falling down, while a sleeping policeman dozed next to him. I own a photographic still from this film, which shows Houdini in two handcuffs in the jail cell, a darby and the French lettercuff. The photo and a blow up of Houdini and his wrists clearly show the lettercuff.



Photo still from early 1900's French Houdini film *entitled*  
*Merveilleux Exploits du Celebre Houdini a Paris*



Close up of Houdini from previous photo. Notice he's wearing the French lettercuff and a darby.

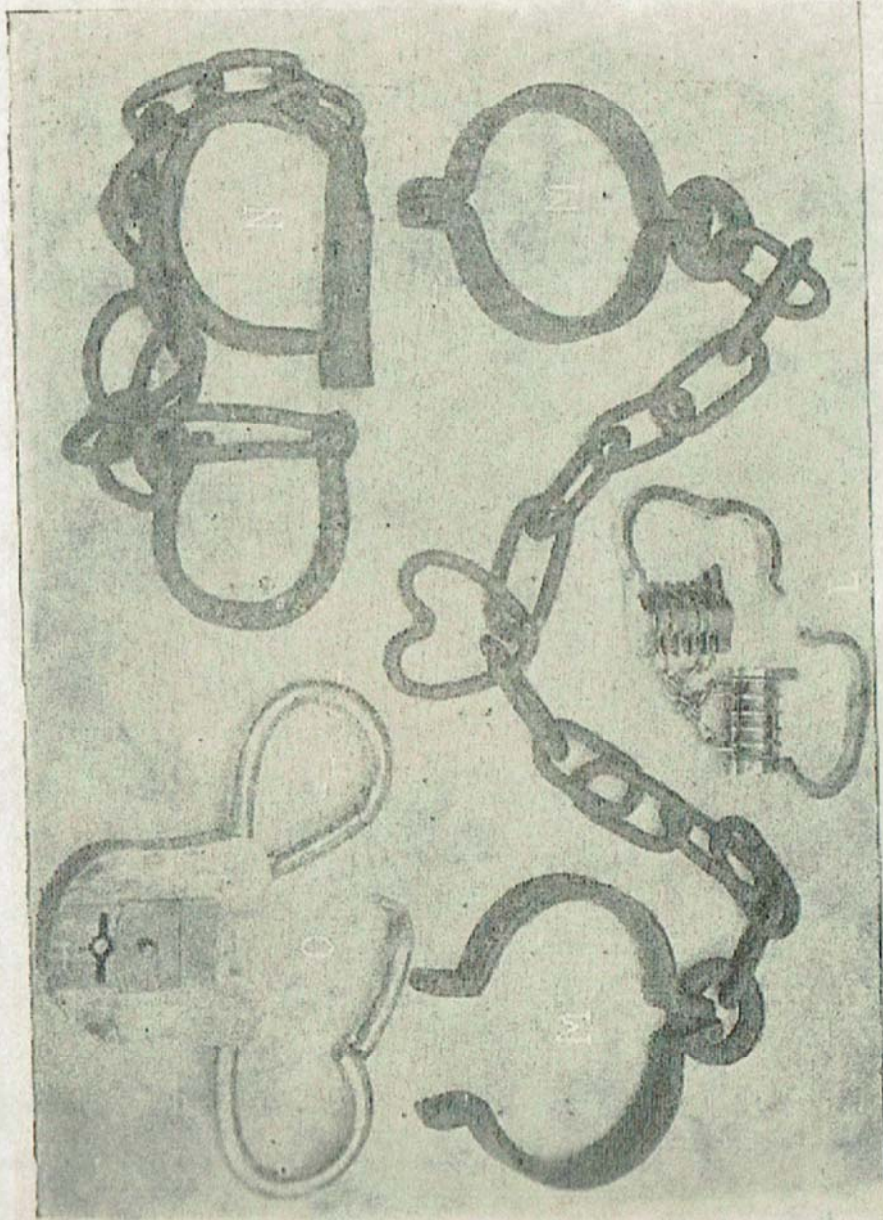
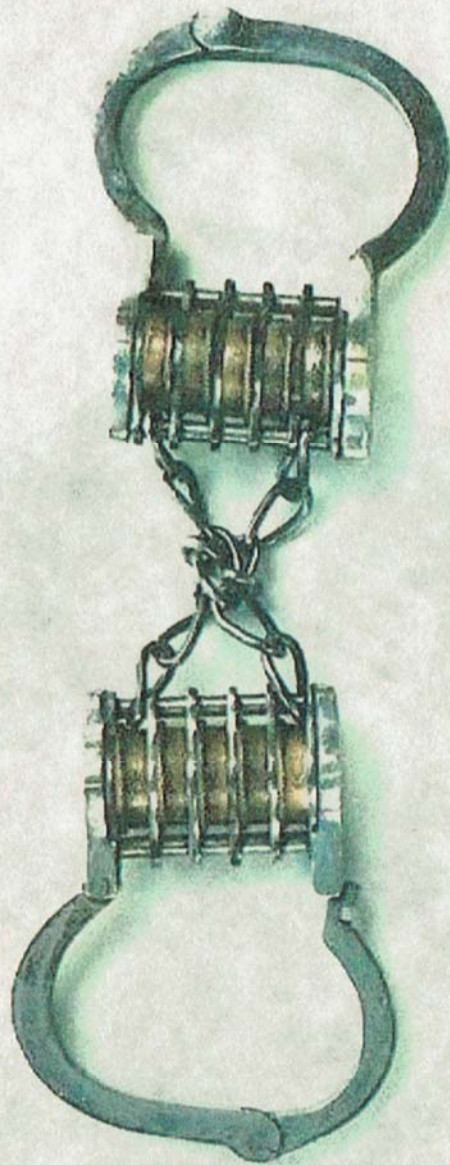


Illustration No. 7

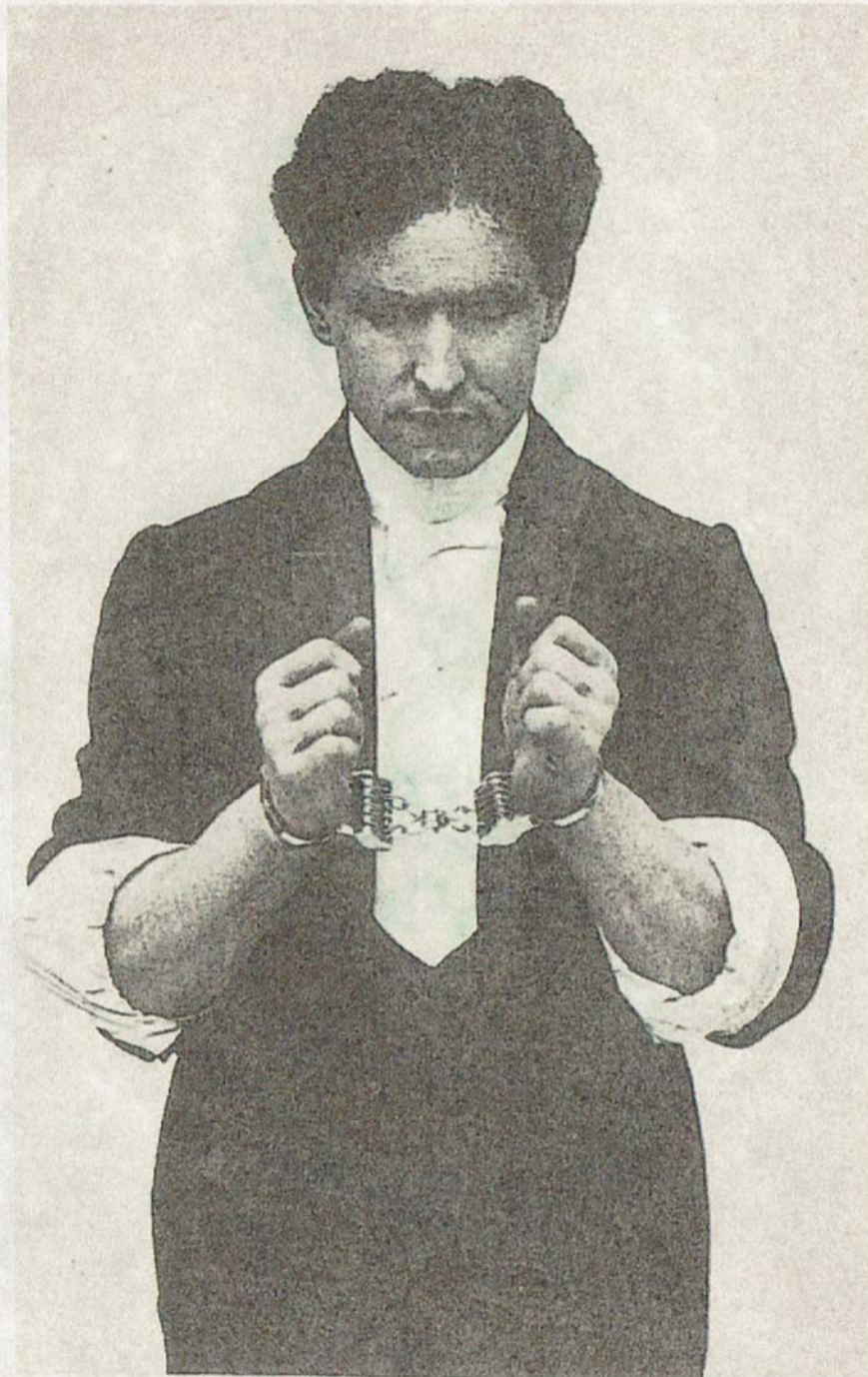
From Handcuff Secrets, 1910, page 39.



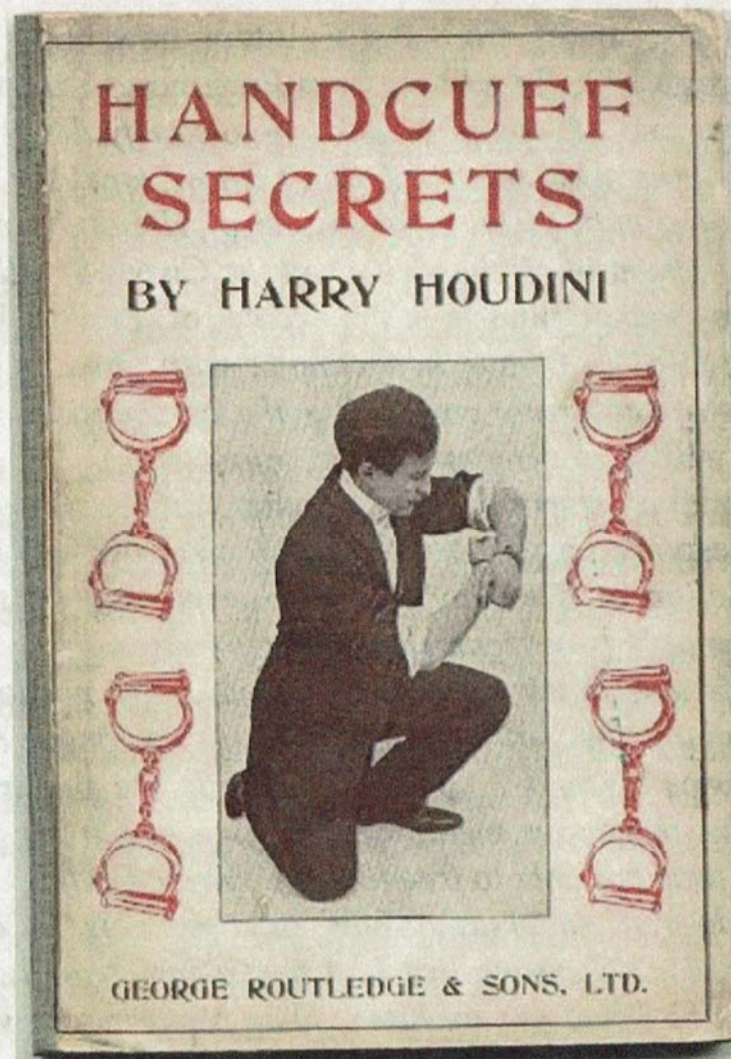


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*Ian McColl's Houdini French Cuff with Letterlock  
reproduction*



Harry "Handcuff" Houdini, in French cuff with Letterlock;  
@1909



*1910 hard cover edition of Handcuff Secrets*

The French lettercuff is unique among Houdini's "supercuffs". It is the only cuff used to both challenge Houdini, and that Houdini used to challenge a rival escape artist. A scrapbook Houdini kept of his rivals resides in a public institution, and in it there are several news stories about Kleppini. Kenneth Silverman, while researching his biography about Houdini, had several of these articles translated. In one of them Kleppini threatens to cuff Houdini so that he cannot

escape. I now quote from Pat Cullitons new book *Houdini The key*, page 142; In a letter from Engelberto Kleppini to an unknown paper:, "*Kleppini: I ask you to clarify the article you printed in your last issue. I don't know anything about a rejection of a cuff. I have taken one of Houdini's cuffs and opened it in front of all the visitors at the Circus Sidoli on June 19 of this year (author's note; date of French lettercuff challenge, 1902). I have had contact with Houdini twice in writing and once orally concerning the competition and I am positively willing to give much more information.*"

Houdini responded in another article, in German. Houdini response, again, from Pat's book I quote, "*Houdini: The correction of Kleppini's so much runs against the truth that I am unable to overcome my astonishment at it.*"

*It is true that I have promised Kleppini not to publish anything about this matter, but, I can no longer afford to keep my promise and I confirm that it is the full truth that Kleppini on the above mentioned evening at Circus Sidoli in Dortmund was not able to free himself from my cuffs.*

*I do not understand how he now gets to claiming something else. Personally I had to fee him after two hours from the cuffs I had put on him. "The performance was long over. The cuff I used was a simple French police cuff.*

*It is not my manner to argue with my imitators- mit meinen nechemem herumzustreiten-and this especially applies to Kleppini, who used my name for unfair advertisement. This also was the case in Dortmund. I was notified about it by accident, early enough to intervene. In the future I will take a close look at the advertisements of this gentleman, and if necessary find means to prevent damage to my name and reputation through unfair competition and advertising.*

*Kleppini also claims that he had challenged me to a competition. This is also untrue. I am saying all this so that everyone can get a clearer picture of the facts of the case and everyone will find me correct in answering only once."*

Kenneth Silverman had another article from the imitators scrapbook translated, titled "Der Entiarvie Esselkonig" The unmasked escape king. The translation reads: "Kleppini, who just eight days ago in a one-page advertisement in the trade magazine artist, called for an escape competition - entfessellungskonkurren - has been exposed at Circus Krembsen in Essen, on the same day on which his advertisement appeared. Kleppini had announced in marktschreierischer manner that the locksmith Nordmann would tie him. At first the king of locks tried to get around Herr Nordman by having other locks handed to him that were not as complicated. Finally he had to submit to having his feet locked together. He was however not able to free himself, even though he had his hands free and had to be unlocked to the great laughter of the numerous audience - and Kleppini did not want to be bound with a lot give him by Herr Nordman. The audience rewarded him with little complimenting and the management asked Kleppini to leave the ménage. Security had to take care of him and bring him to a safe place."

Another article for a Halifax newspaper dated November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1902, shows Houdini was challenged to escape from the letter lock cuffs after he had defeated Kleppini with them.; Houdini showed the audience that the cuffs opened when the rotors spelled "Clef". The article, retyped here, states:

### ***HOUDINI THE MYSTIFIER.***

#### ***REMARKABLE SCENE AT THE PALACE.***

***"THE PLOT THICKENS."***

19

*Reutter then inquired in a peculiar tone, as if feigning indifference; "What letters or word opens this cuff?"*

Houdini continues on his merry career. Each performance brings its new wonder, and the town talk consists of "it's a trick, but however does he do it?" Last night's experience was one of the most remarkable ever witnessed by a Halifax audience, and through it Houdini is just a little more of a mystery than ever he was before. Mr. Lewis Crossley, who is manager for Messrs. T. Gaines and Sons, joiners of Stanbury Street, issued a challenge which on the face of it was absurd because it appeared so impossible to accept successfully. He merely wanted to "bring along a common packing case, to nail Houdini in it, and then rope him in. Further, if he escaped without injury from the case or the ropes he would "certainly be a champion." The box provided was of stout deal, an inch thick, around which were strong wooden bars. Five or six joiners in the audience assisted Mr. Crossley in the nailing up process after Houdini had entered his cage. Nail after nail was driven in, and the audience finally thought there was an ample sufficiency and shouted "Stop." When they roped the concern—and this was pretty thoroughly done—for, not content with the one rope, they borrowed that which is usually employed in connection with the scenery. Next the stage was searched for trapdoors which might be useful, and at last the box was permitted to go behind the curtain. Twenty-two minutes went by and then Houdini appeared minus caller and tie and looking a bit disheveled but still smiling. He commenced to speak, but it was some minutes before the audience would attend, for the applause was long and loud.

**At the first performance Houdini was challenged with a pair of handcuffs which were out of the regulation type. However, he consented to tackle them, though this is against his usual custom. They were large letter padlocks, joined together to form a pair of handcuffs, and it took Houdini seven minutes to escape, the magic word being a difficult one—"Clef." He also performed the Hindoo Needle Trick.**

*The announcement of a matinee at the Victoria Hall on Saturday has aroused much interest and seats are being well booked. Houdini will appear in some new tricks and a specially augmented company will support him.*

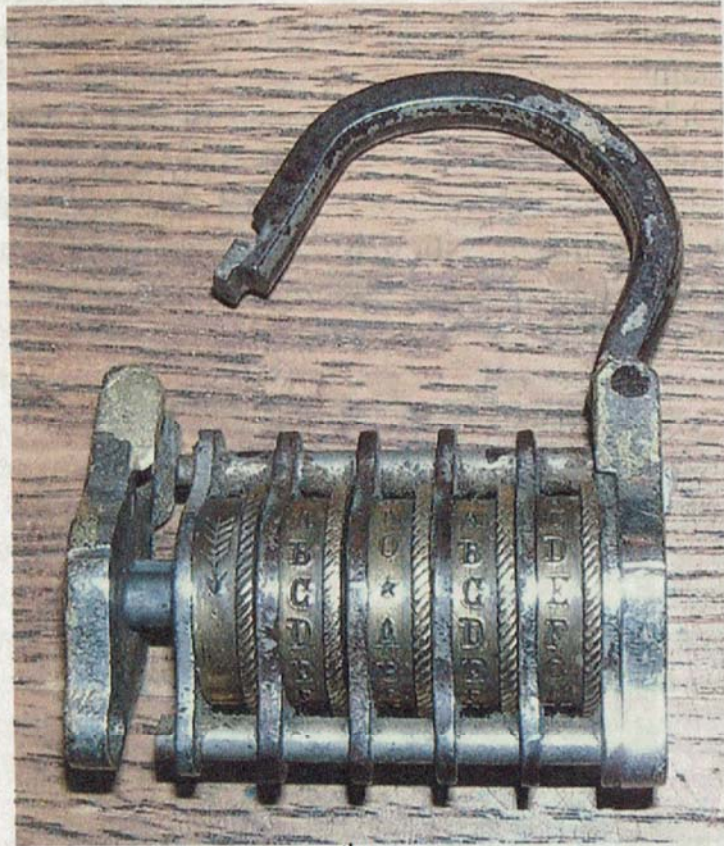
Many Thanks to Pat Culliton who assisted me in typing up this 1902 and send it to me via email. With failing eyesight I could not make out much of the content. Thank you Patrick. And again, thank you Patrick for all the knowledge, research, and sharing of your knowledge with those interested in the history of Harry Houdini.

Thanks to collector and historian Bob Dix, who loaned me his rare French Letterlock, identical to the lock Houdini used to have his handcuffs made. Indeed the combination is changeable, and the operation is both quick, and fascinating. Following are photographs of the original padlock, which show its operation.



The padlock - open.

To open the padlock you dial the last four wheels to the set combination. At this point, as with most letterlocks, the end cap will pull outward, allowing the shackle to then open. This is shown in the previous photograph. With this particular letterlock, you can now go further. On normal letterlocks you unscrew the end cap, and remove the outer wheels, and place them back onto the inner wheels to set the new combination. This lock is different:

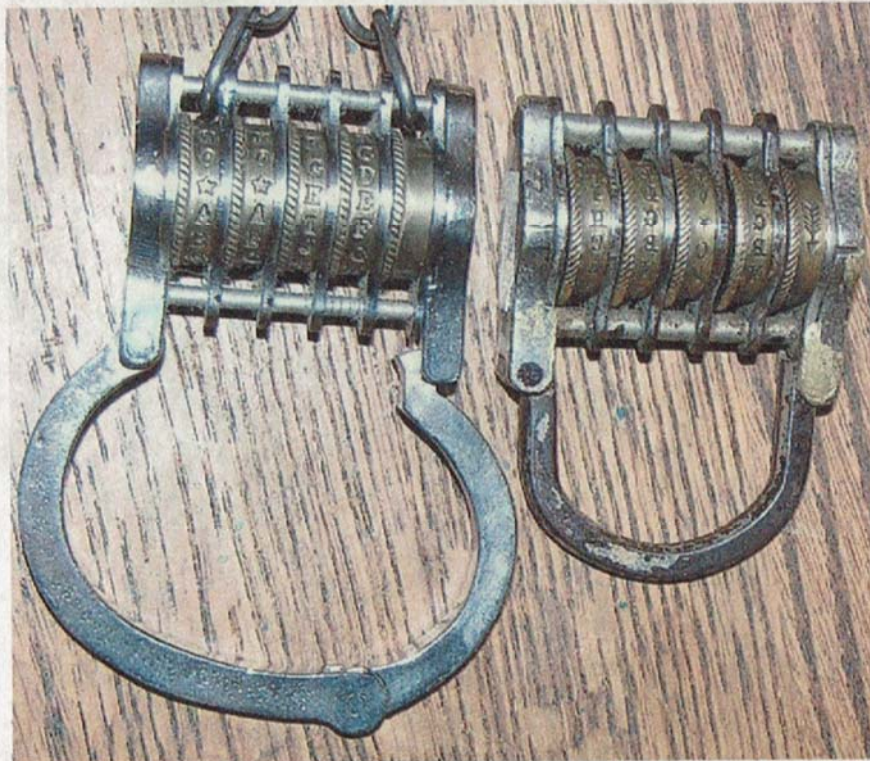


Once open, you dial the "5<sup>th</sup>" wheel on the left about 110 degrees further which enables you to pull out the left end cap further (as seen in above photo). At this time you may dial your four lettered wheels to whatever you want the new combination to be. Then, simply close the end cap, rotate the



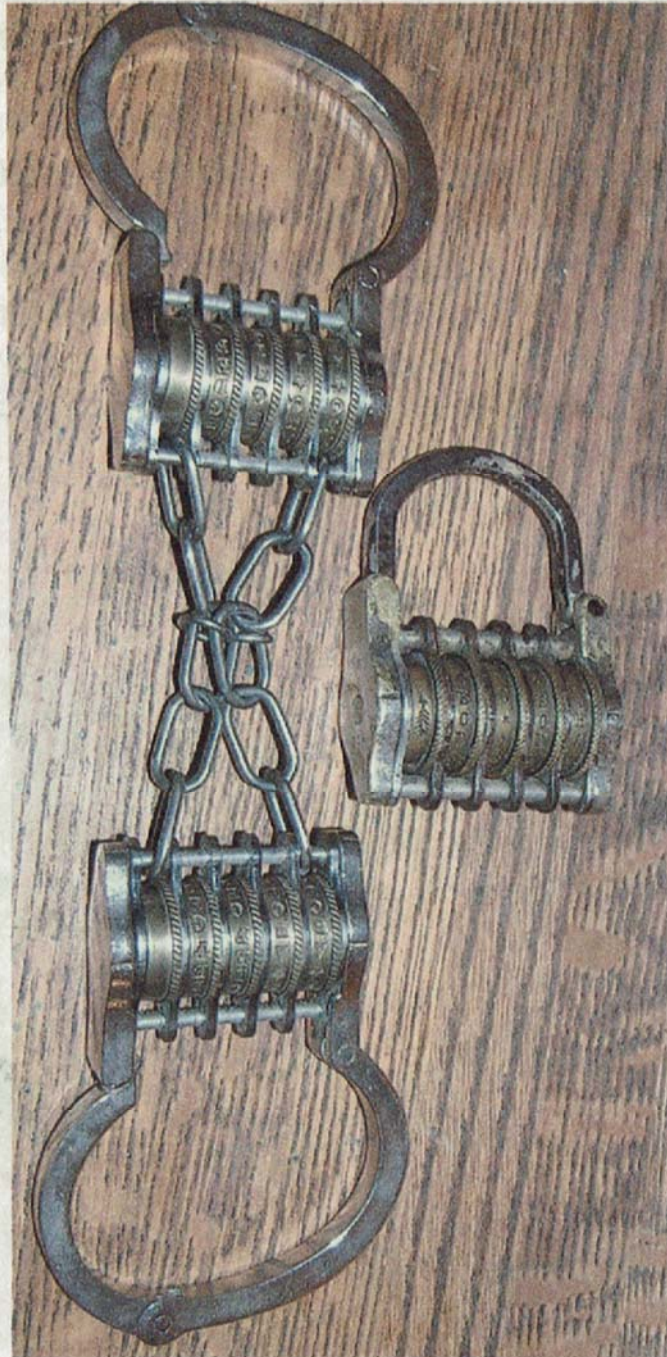
“5<sup>th</sup> wheel (left) back to it’s original position, and then close and lock the lock. The combination is now reset.

Another difference between this and other letterlocks, is that with this letterlock each time you turn a wheel, there is a distinct “clicking” as you turn the wheels. There must be some type of internal spring, which clicks in some notch in the wheel. So the wheels must be in exact position since they click into position. It is truly a beautiful and well-made letterlock.



McColl reproduction French lettercuff (Left), and original French letterlock (Right)

The padlock is courtesy of the Bob Dix collection



A comparison of Ian McColl's reproduction handcuff with an original letterlock used to make the handcuff.

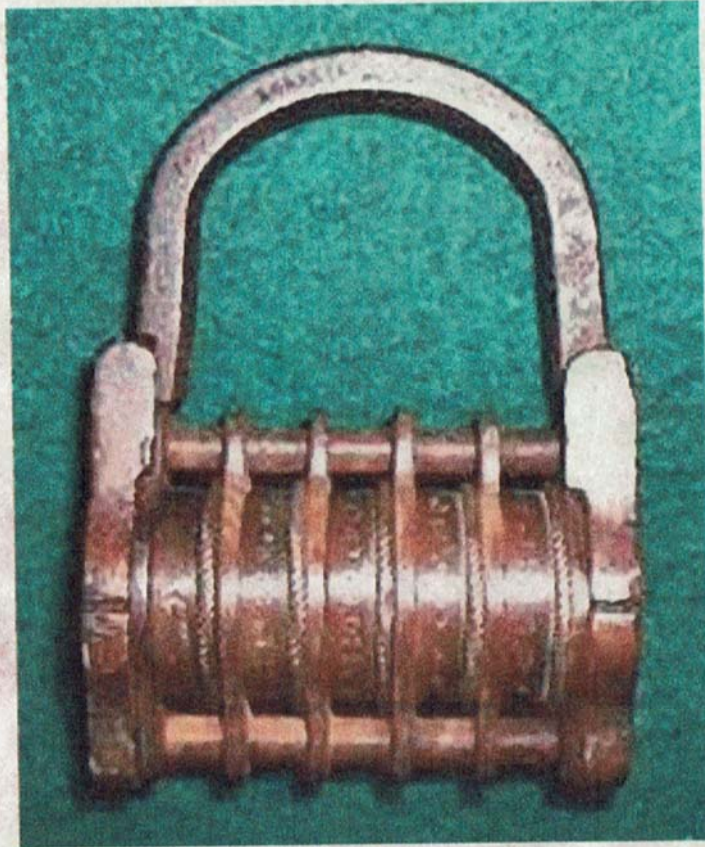
Damon Shields had the opportunity to visit Jon Oliver and took this photo of the original Houdini French Lettercuff next to Ian's reproduction handcuff. Thanks to Ian for and Jon for allowing 26 collectors to own a wonderful reproduction of such a significant and rare piece of Houdiniana.



Jon Oliver's original Houdini cuff and Ian McColl's reproduction  
(Photo by Damon Shields)

Thanks to the following people who contributed to this manuscript on Houdini's French Lettercuff:

**Jon Oliver, Ian McColl, Pat Culliton,  
Kenneth Silverman, Bob Dix,  
and of course - Houdini.**



Another original French lettercuff lock  
This one sold several years ago on Ebay