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Nearly Dying for a Living

HAD I been born of different parentage, I might have developed into a very dangerous criminal.

And I think I would have made a good one. They might have caught me, but they have never made a handcuff from which I haven't been able to free myself or a prison door that I haven't been able to open. Or if I could have sold for as much as \$25 a complete exposure of the methods I use in escaping from locked prison cells and handcuffs, I would now be a distinguished but respectable President of a Modern School of Magic, with perhaps a correspondence course attached. I offered my "story" to almost every daily newspaper in New York City; none of them would purchase it. They probably put me down as a new species of "nut." Now I am actually asked for a story by the editor of a real magazine. How times have changed!

I wanted to sell the story and have it printed in a New York newspaper so that my proposed School of Magic would be well advertised. But I couldn't even raise that \$25 to pay for advertising, so I gave up the school idea and went on the road as a performer. And then I began to learn that the public of this country and every other country on earth would pay good money to see the accomplishment of seemingly impossible things.

AS a small boy I had always been interested in locks. I liked to tinker with them just as other small boys enjoyed taking clocks to pieces. I discovered that a key wasn't always a necessity in opening a lock. Very early in life I graduated from the simple lock class and went to work on complicated locks.

I have been locked in prisons all over Europe and all over America, and the longest period of time I ever stayed in any one of them was two hours. That was in a little old prison in an English town. It was an old-style lock and almost proved my undoing. As is customary in feats of this nature I completely disrobe so that there is no possibility of the concealment of anything that could be used in the opening of the lock. On this particular day it was very cold and I was soon chilled through. For two hours I worked on the lock to no avail. Then I grabbed the iron door and shook it with all my might, and it opened.

It had never been locked, and therefore I couldn't unlock it.

BUT breaking out of prison cells and freeing myself from handcuffs couldn't go on forever, and being a good showman—which I insist I am—I sought for other means of entertaining the public. I knew, as everyone knows, that the easiest way to attract a crowd is to let it be known that at a given time and a given place some one is going to attempt something that in the event of failure will mean sudden death. That's what attracts us to the man who paints the flagstaff on the tall building, or to the "human fly" who scales the walls of the same building.

If we knew that there was no possibility of either one of them falling or, if they did fall, that they wouldn't injure themselves in any way, we wouldn't pay any more attention to them than we do a nursemaid wheeling a baby carriage.

Therefore, I said to myself, why not give the public a real thrill?

Then it was that I began to permit people to manacle me and lock me in boxes and throw me overboard into rivers and lakes and seas.

And just in passing I want to tell you that I have never once undertaken this feat without being fully conscious of the fact that if any of my secret preparations fail me it must lead to violent and sudden death.



By Harry Houdini

A fool, you say, and maybe I am, but it is the game that I have chosen to play and so long as the 999 chances out of the thousand are in my favor I'll probably keep right at it until my muscles refuse to do my further bidding or my nerve gives way or my wife grows more insistent that I give it up.

SOME of you who read this may have been at the Battery in New York on July 15, 1912. The date is seared on my memory, and so is the picture of the crowd that I saw just before I lowered myself, manacled and handcuffed, into a packing-box that stood at the water's edge. Into this box had been placed 200 pounds of lead so that it would quickly sink, and with the top securely nailed it was bound about with ropes, and held for a moment until I gave the word, and then thrown overboard.

Whatever happened I don't know until this day. It may have been that a passing boat disturbed the water, for as the box was sinking it seemed to be thrown about roughly. What I had to do to make my escape from the box had to be done in seconds, and even as I write of it now there comes to me a feeling of suffocation as I recall the moment of my discovery that the ropes had become entangled and I was face to face with the dreaded one chance of the thousand.

ALWAYS when under water, and of necessity holding my breath, my mind works just as freely and clearly as under normal conditions. On this day, down there under many feet of water, it became necessary for me to work faster than I had ever worked in my life before and my mental apparatus proved equal to the task. However I did it I am not quite sure now, but my time hadn't come and the thousands of persons who watched cheered loudly as I came to the surface freed of the manacles and handcuffs.

My Battery predicament, however, wasn't quite so terrifying as a situation in which I found myself in Pittsburgh several years ago. During an engagement there it had been advertised that on a certain day I should be handcuffed and chained and placed in a box and dropped into the river from a bridge.

Nature was unkind, however, and when the day came the river had been frozen over to a depth of seven inches, which, as a matter of fact, wasn't surprising, as it was almost midwinter. But ice-water never has had any terrors for me, and a hole was cut in the ice just below the bridge and everybody, including a crowd of several thousands of persons, arrived on time.

With the handcuffs and chains in place, I was put into the trunk, which in turn was bound with ropes and chains. Then the trunk was dropped into the river through the hole in the ice. The handcuffs and chains about my arms and legs and the bound trunk offered no more than the usual difficulties, but when I found myself free of them all I discovered that I had drifted with the current and when I attempted to rise my head bumped against the seven inches of ice. Fully conscious of the seriousness of the situation I looked about in the hope that a greater light might come through where the hole was and give me my directions. But there was no guiding light.

THEN I knew that I must breathe. I was under the water longer than the allotted time. And breathing meant that I should drown and go on drifting for weeks and months. But as I had never before given up, I didn't give up then. Instead, I found an "airpocket," a space in which the ice seemed to curve upward,

leaving an inch or more of room between the surface of the water and the ice above. I lay flat on my back, tight up against the ice, and breathed. Then I found that the water came in little intermittent waves and that by keeping my face close against the ice I could move about and get an occasional breath. I still held in my hands the handcuffs that I had removed from my wrists, and with these pressed against the ice I began a circular movement. And suddenly I bobbed up through the hole, and men reached down and lifted me out onto the ice, wrapped me up and hurried me to my hotel.

The crowd that had come to see me and my assistants believed that I had been drowned and, although I didn't hear it, they say that a mighty cheer went up when I appeared.

These outdoor "stunts" are performed entirely for purposes of publicity. I vary them somewhat, and occasionally permit myself to be laced into a straight-jacket and pulled up feet first by a rope attached to a block suspended from the roof of some building in the business district of whatever town I happen to be in.

IN Oakland, California, just a few years ago, I was challenged to release myself from a straight-jacket provided for the purpose and accepted the challenge. The usual preparations were made and I was drawn up to a height of 150 feet and hung there, head down, while I succeeded in releasing myself from the jacket. Then I discovered that in twisting about in order to remove the jacket I had entangled the ropes, and when I gave the signal to lower away the ropes refused to work.

Ordinarily this feat is accomplished in a couple of minutes, but in this instance I was compelled to hang there, with the blood rushing to my head, for a period of eight minutes. In the meantime, from a neighboring roof, men had rushed a ladder and had lowered it and held it out so that I could reach with my hands and take hold of the lower end. Then came a window cleaner, one of those reckless fellows who risk their lives every day for three or four dollars. He came over the edge of the roof and down the ladder, held above by half-a-dozen men and below by all of my weight and strength. It took him just a moment to clear the ropes and free me from my dangerous position.

ONE would suppose that no danger whatever attached to the feat of escaping from a prison cell. but, in the language of the gentleman who was asked if the Peace Treaty would be ratified, you never can tell. I had been locked in a cell in the city prison of Providence, R. I., and had made my escape therefrom. Then it was necessary to unlock (Concluded on page 79)

ow Armies Got too Big

(Concluded from page 29)

of comprehension. Germany was the greatest nation of Continental Europe in which the population increased the most; it was the country also which possessed the greatest number of manufactories of arms. Obliging all the other nations to take part in this struggle in which the quantity must prevail over the quality, she would reasonably hope to keep and to increase the military superiority gained on the battlefield of 1870. And the calculation was correct. But Germany was drawn too far by her own force, her own riches, and by the almost prodigious augmentation in her population and in her industries. She failed in her scope, precipitating her own downfall and dragging Europe into a frightful adventure not from the failure to create a large enough army, but from having created one too large. All the secret of the world war which has dismayed the universe with its surprises rests in this simple truth. Germany has been beaten by numbers, not so much by the numbers of her enemies, as by her own excessive quantities of soldiers.

For what reason did the war of 1914 between France and Germany, which all thought must resemble that of 1870, follow a course so different and so unexpected? For what reason, after having moved with such impetus in August, 1914, the French and German armies in but four months and after the battles of the Marne and of the Yser, did the war strike them exhausted to the earth, where they clung to their positions from which they never moved until the last month of the war toward the middle of the year 1918? Because France, like Germany, had placed in the field so many millions of men that they were able to close up all the free space from the Swiss frontier to the North Sea, with an uninterrupted line of soldiers and trenches. Strategy, the daughter of the spirit, has need of vast, free spaces, in which, at the right moment, to throw out her combinations. In 1870 she had these free spaces, so she was able to bring the war to an end in a few weeks. But these spaces she had no more in 1914. Meeting an uninterrupted and insuperable wall of men and of earth, she was obliged to declare herself helpless, to tear up her designs and plans and to throw them on one side.

THEN was begun the most terrible tragedy of modern history. Condemned to helplessness by numbers, to what had the spirit recourse in order to bring the interminable war to a speedy close? To machines. Before 1914 it was a common prediction that, if a war should break out in the future, it would be terrible on account of the murderous instruments possessed by the armies at that time. But the arms with which the armies took the field in 1914 were almost toys in comparison with those which they employed in the last months of 1918. From August of 1914 the number and variety of the instruments of warfare increased from month to month in a terrifying manner. The greater number of the ten millions of men who perished in this world war were killed by arms of which in 1914 there was not even an idea. Yet all these have not served in any manner for the purpose to which they were destined. This is not to be wondered at. Arms are but machines; and could machines, inanimate creatures, do that which their creator, the human mind, could not? Europe has consumed all her fortunes to annul the

effect of numbers by engines: in vain the number and the metal have conglutinated together from one side and another in two enormous and brute masses, in which men were the appendices and servants of the machines which should have been the instruments of their intelligence. Those machines have been able to exterminate ten millions of men; but in four years they have not succeeded in doing more than to scratch and to blow the dust off the almost immobile masses of the opposing armies.

Then, one day, at last, of all the materials necessary to these masses, one was lacking—and had to lack—one side or another; the grain. It is not an exaggeration to say that the world war, more than by military art or by arms, was decided by the granaries of America. At the beginning of November, 1918, when the armistice was signed, Germany had still an army, with which she might have resisted for many months, perhaps for years. Why, instead, did she capitulate? Because, exhausted by misery and hunger, by losses, by the futility of what, for convention, men still called victories—each one of which was an obligation to new and harder battles—her allies had abandoned her. Neither her numbers, nor her arms, nor all her material resources could serve Germany any further, alone, bleeding and suffering from hunger. To have *willed* to be too many, to be sure of conquering, was fatal to the Germans and was the reason by which they lost the war, while their army was perhaps stronger in numbers and in capacity, than each of the armies with which it was measured. To have been *forced* to be too many in order to weaken by number the overwhelming number of Germans and of their allies, is the reason why the victory cost such a high price to France, to Italy and to England, all three of which are almost ruined.

TERRIFIED by this universal ruin and chaos, many persons in Europe began to invoke the end of the war, peace universal and disarmament. "Let us lay down our arms: this must be the last of wars," has been said and repeated. In the minds of many the League of Nations ought to be the organ of general disarmament and of perpetual peace. But this manner of settling the question seems a little too simple and hasty. The causes for which peoples and states have made wars in the past are so many and so diverse that it appears, at least, rash to suppose that they can all disappear from one moment to another. On the other hand, when one talks of disarmament, one must not understand a universal and entire laying down of all arms, but rather the limitations of armaments. It is clear that in the future, as in the past, all the states will have need of a certain armed force. Lenine has given a proof of this; for, as soon as he arrived in power, crying to the world that he wanted to give it a *regime* of peace and of universal brotherhood, he made haste to create a new army under the name of the "Red Guards."

THE problem therefore, which is placed before Europe is this: Since the present terrible crisis is the effect of the military institutions which flourished in Continental Europe at the outbreak of the world war, how must these be reformed so that such a crisis may not be repeated? We shall endeavor to show this, as briefly as possible in our next paper.

Dying for a Living

(Concluded from page 40)

a door that led to the outside. I did this and started on the run toward the office of the chief of police. There really wasn't any occasion to hurry except that I was anxious to do the whole thing in the shortest possible space of time.

But on the Providence police force there was one officer we hadn't reckoned with. He appeared just as I left the jail door and thinking I was an escaping prisoner he undertook to wing me with his revolver. He was a poor shot, however, and the first bullet went on and flatted itself against the stone wall right ahead of me. For an instant I contemplated stopping, but the chief's office was only a few more feet away and I did those few feet in .000 flat. A second bullet

nearly destroyed all of my expectations of a further successful career. It, too, flatted itself against the stone wall just as I passed through the office door.

In Melbourne, Australia, after being manacled I made a dive and while under water released myself from the manacles and rose to the surface free. Very much to my surprise, and to the surprise of the immense crowd that thronged the neighborhood, I had company on the way up. It was the body of a gentleman who had disappeared from his home a week before and I had evidently disturbed it so that it rose to the surface. I am the most companionable man in the world, and like company, but they've got to be live ones.

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