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CONTENTS

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JOHN TEMPLE GRAVES
ALBERT PAYSON TURHUNE
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GUÉVERNEUR MORRIS
WALT MASON
EDWIN BALMER
B. C. FORBES
ARTHUR SOMERS ROCHE
HARRY HOUDINI
MARIE GANZ
ROBERT W. CHAMBERS
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M. LEONE BRACKET
ARMAND BOETH
JAMES MONTGOMERY FLAGG
VINCENT ADERENTE
E. C. SHINN
F. STROTHMAN
H. G. PETER

PAGE

11
12
14
17
19
20
22
24
25
28
30
33
34
36
37
40
41
42
44
45
46
48
49
50
54
56
58
60
62
64
66
68

"Do Your Christmas Shopping Early," cover by Penrhyn Stanlaws
For This We Are Thankful
Editorial
Anarchy is the misshapen child of Injustice; force is unnecessary in a Republic
Does a disincarnate spirit take possession of this young girl's body and lead her into grave danger?
Three old salts and a game of Strip Poker
Roosevelt and the Rat Killer
Of hunting "big game" in the White House
Is Trinity Church a Squatter?
Should not the richest Protestant church in America be given a clear title to its wealth?
The Little Things That Matter
Of a man and his wife—a story for Hardheads and Olds
Speaking Likenesses of Spellbinding Personalities
A view of the Senate from our own gallery
An Amateur Knight Errant
A gay little chorus girl meets a grim young man
"Ring Out the Old, Ring in the New"
"Conscription has made war a lost art"
How Armies Got too Big to Fight
Old warfare versus the new
Better Days
What is love, anyway, and what lies back of the impulses that control it?
Why I Don't Go to New York
City or crossroads—it's all the same if you're willing to work
Resurrection Rock
Can love—the love of a father for his only daughter—reach out from beyond the grave?
Sharing profits with labor, till labor profits the business
Ink-spots on the Wall
A mere girl called Nancy involves herself in the crimes of the Arm-chair Club
Nearly Dying for a Living
The lock has got to be made that can shut Houdini in
They Send Me to Prison
Marie Ganz' own story of her sixty days in the workhouse
In the Cypress Swamp
An American girl against a Yazoo-White Magic fighting Black—with death for the defeated
This Light Must Live
One man's way of solving his domestic problem—and what came of it
God Builds a House
A poem of inspiration for the New Year
The Art of the Month
"Civilian Clothes" by Thomas Buchanan, with an introductory comment by Dr. Frank Crane
"Is Beauty in Art Old Fashioned?" by Sir Edward J. Poynter, a distinguished modern, answers the question in the painting here reproduced
"Ramsay Milholland," by the great American novelist, Booth Tarkington
Science of the Month
What Makes Sunshine?—War Curbs Insanity—Foods that Don't Feed—Is the Country Unhealthy?
Strictly Russel
What use is it to have the prettiest face in the Ghetto, if the one man refuses to admire it?
Wanted—A Second-Hand Cook
In and out the kitchen at Bert Leon Taylor's
The Official Hushpaker gets his wrath as perpetual chairman of New York's Welcome Committee
A Gray Hair In His Whiskers
Pranks of a "bad actor"—off stage
How Big Business Men Grew Rich
"The story of Du Pont, one of the half dozen ablest business men in the country"
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 had 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 couldn't open it 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 not well-known President of a Modern School of Magic, with perhaps a class and was to work on complicated locks. I attached. I offered my "story" to almost every daily newspaper in New York City; none of them would publish 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 tell 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 people of this country and every other country on earth would pay good money to see the accomplishment of seemingly impossible things.

A small boy I had always been interested in locks. I liked to tinker with them just as other boys do with a toy. I sort of knew that a key wasn't always a necessity in opening a lock. Very early in life I graduated from the simple lock to the complicated one. I have been locked in prisons all over Europe and all over America, and the longest period of time I ever stayed in one 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 fear of nature I completely distrusted so 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. Finally 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 the performer will attempt something that in the event of failure will mean sudden death. That's what attracts us to the man who paints the flagpole 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 nurserymaid who washes the baby's head. Therefore, I said to myself, why not give the public a real thrill?

Then it occurred to me that I began to permit people to manipulate me and lock me in boxes and throw me overboard into rivers and lakes and seas. And now, having let you know, I have 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 all 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.

What 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 did I it and I am not quite sure now, but my time didn'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 seven 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 any terror for me, and a hole was cut in the ice just below the bridge and everywhere, including a crowd of several thousands of persons, arrived on time.

With the handcuffs and chains in place, I was put into a trunk, and the trunk 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 all the ice, 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 situation I looked about in the hope that a greater force could be used through where the hole was and give me my directions. But there was no guiding light.

Then I knew that I must strangle. I was under the water longer than the allotted time. And breathing meant that I should drown and go drifting for weeks and months. But as I had never before given up, I didn't give up then. Instead, I found an "air-pocket," a space in which the ice curved upward, leaving an inch or more of room between the surface of the water and the ice above. I lay flat upon the ice, my head nearly all the ice, and breathed. Then I found that the water came in little intermittent waves and that by keeping my face above 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 the serial 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 shore.

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

These outdoor "stunts" are performed entirely for purposes of publicity. 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 getting about in order to remove the jacket I had entangled the ropes, and when I gave the signal to lower 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 up to my head, for a period of eight minutes. In the meantime, from one to another, the crowd had gathered and looked in a helpless manner, not knowing what to do. I came up to the edge of the roof and down the ladder, and below by half-a-dozen men and below by all of my weight and strength. It took me just a moment to clear the ropes and free me from the dangerous position.

One would suppose that no danger whatever attached to the feat of escaping on a high platform, but, in the language of the gentleman who was asked if the Peace Treaty would be ratified, you never know till you try. I had been locked in a large cage in Providence, R.I., and had made my escape therefrom. Then it was necessary to unlock (concluded on page 7a).
Dying for a Living

(Concluded from page 30)

A door that led to the outside. I did this and started on the run toward the office of the shop. I really was not in any hurry, except that I was anxious to do the whole thing in the shortest possible amount of time.

But on the Providence police force there was one thing that hadn’t reckoned with. He appeared just as I left the jail door and thinking I was an escaping prisoner he undertook to stop me with a .45. He was a poor shot, however, and the first bullet went off just big enough to hit myself against the stone wall right ahead of me. For an instant I contemplated stopping, but the chief’s office was only about two feet away and I was those few feet in 4000 flat. A second bullet nearly destroyed all of my expectations of a further successful career. It, too, flattened itself against the stone wall just as I passed through the office door.

In Melbourne, Australia, after being manumed I made a dive and was seized with a desire to sell a Spinal Spine. Its results are marvelous. It is nature’s

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