

e x p l o r e

57

Fiction

The Death Trap

PAUL GALLICO

Examine What You Know

The title of the next selection is "The Death Trap." What do you think of when you hear the word *trap*? Name as many kinds of traps as you can think of. Discuss any experiences you may have had with traps, including any experiences you may have had with being trapped yourself. Compare your experiences with those of the characters in the next story.

Expand Your Knowledge



Harry Houdini

In the story you are about to read, the main character earns his living as an escape artist, a person who executes amazing escapes from supposedly escape-proof devices. While the hero of this story is a fictional character, he may have been modeled after the most famous escape artist of all—Harry Houdini (1874–1926). The son of a Hungarian rabbi, Houdini performed incredible feats, freeing himself in seconds from such devices as leg irons, jail cells, sealed boxes, and even ten pairs of handcuffs. His most famous trick involved escaping from an airtight tank filled with water. In another trick he would have himself handcuffed, tied up with a rope, and stuffed into a box. The box would then be padlocked and dropped into water. Moments later Houdini would emerge.

Write Before You Read

Two of the characters in the next selection believe in love at first sight. What do you think of this idea? Is love at first sight a myth or the way love often happens? Write your opinion.

■ A biography of the author can be found in the Reader's Handbook.

38

The Death Trap

PAUL GALLICO

There's no such thing as magic. You know that. You've seen a lot of magic shows from out front where the magician performs the apparently impossible. Well, it not only seems impossible; it is. There's a gaff to everything.

Gaff is the carnival word for the gimmick, the trick, the concealed device, the common-sense explanation of how it is done. And usually the gaff is something so simple you don't want to believe it. You'd see the Great Armando buried handcuffed in a stone sarcophagus,¹ and three minutes later he'd be out of it, taking his bow. Common sense would tell you he couldn't do it unless he had super-human powers or assistance. But the kind of showmanship he'd give you would make you want to believe in the superhuman powers. That's what you paid your money for.

Yet in nine cases out of ten, he had assistance. I provided it. With my help he escaped from a sealed subway caisson,² a time vault in the subtreasury, a four-thousand-year-old Greek stone coffin, the punishment cell at Alcatraz,³ and countless types of manacles and restraining jackets.

But don't forget, he had moxie⁴ along with it. Even if you know the gimmicks, it takes guts to let them lace you into a strait-jacket, stuff you into a government mailbag, padlock it, nail you into a packing case

bound with rope, and drop you into an icy river in mid-winter.

The only one to come near the Great Armando was Houdini, and everything Houdini did, Armando did better. Houdini did the river-escape trick, only he used handcuffs that he could get out of in ten seconds. Nobody but Armando dared to do it with the straitjacket and letting an expert truss⁵ him up.

Yet, as I wrote in my diary, the straitjacket finished him—leastways, the gimmick in it. And a woman put it there. The only woman he ever loved.

He was a queer duck, was Joe Ferris. Nobody ever knew him or got close to him, not even me, and I was his trusted partner. I suppose that was the Polish in him. Often he was moody and suspicious. He kept his money stashed away in cash in safe-deposit boxes under different names that I never even knew. He thought only of his reputation and the myth of the Great Armando. He said to me, "Remember this. Whatever happens, the Great Armando never fails."

Yet he was no fool, either, and knew the

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1. sarcophagus (sär käf' ə gəs): a coffin or tomb.
 2. caisson (kā' sən): a watertight enclosure used for doing construction work under water.
 3. Alcatraz (al' kə trəz'): an island prison in San Francisco Bay.
 4. moxie (mäks' ē): slang for courage.
 5. truss: to tie.

risks he was running. He once told me, "The first time I get a real bad scare, I'll quit and nobody'll ever hear of the Great Armando again. But up to now I haven't seen anything we can't beat."

But that was before we met up with Sheriff Jules Massin of Ossowo County in the tough River Rouge section of Detroit, where we were doing the water escape as preliminary publicity to Armando's being booked into the Michigan Palace Theater in Detroit. The sheriff had taken up our challenge to lace Armando into a straitjacket from which he could not escape.

"The first time I get a real bad scare, I'll quit and nobody'll ever hear of the Great Armando again."

On the face of it, it was routine. There was no straitjacket made that Armando couldn't get out of in less than a minute. But we never took chances. It was a condition that Armando guaranteed to get out of any restraining device provided he could inspect it first. The padlock on the mail sack had to be closed and opened in our presence. This gave me the necessary gander at the key. And the packing case had to go on exhibition in the lobby of the theater before and after the stunt. That's when we gaffed it.

We thought we had every angle covered. Only we never figured to come up against a man with murder in his heart.

There was a crowd in the sheriff's office the day we went there to inspect the restraints and set up the stunt: deputies, detectives, police, reporters, and photographers. The sheriff's wife was there, too. His office was on the ground floor of his home. At first I didn't notice her. She had a scarf bound around her head, European style. She had pale cheeks and prominent gray-green eyes that seemed absolutely devoid, of expression. They did not even flicker when the sheriff, noticing her in the forefront of those crowding around his desk, snarled, "What the hell you doin' here, Tina? Can't you see I'm busy?"

She was submissive to his abuse; every line of her body proclaimed her to be cowed and hopeless. Yet she did not go, and soon other matters claimed the sheriff's attention.

The sheriff was a mean man. Mean, dirty, and dangerous. He wasn't a copper for nothing. He liked it. We meet all kinds in our racket, from plain smart alecks who think it is fun to make a monkey out of a performer to cops and jailers who don't like to see you make a monkey out of them. But we'd never run up against a guy nursing murder in his heart because it was for free. Armando always signed a release.

That was the sheriff. I knew him for a killer, a killer inside the law from the moment I walked into his office. He was over six feet tall, fat, burly, and dirty. His clothes were dirty, as were his skin, his fingernails; and his teeth. His breath was bad. He wore a fancy gun in a belt holster, silver- and ivory-handled. You could see he loved the power it gave him.

Massin threw a straitjacket onto his desk and sneered, "Anything wrong with that?"

Words
to Know
and Use

devoid (di void') *adj.* completely without
submissive (sub mis' iv) *adj.* displaying no resistance
cowed (koud) *adj.* timid; frightened *cow v.*

It was an ordinary violence-restraint jacket with straps and buckles, the easiest type for Armando, for the canvas was not unusually thick. No matter how strong the manipulator, Armando, by swelling his muscles, could always reserve enough slack to get his arms over his head. Then he opened the buckles *through* the canvas. I told you he had the most powerful fingers in the world. In that department he was superhuman. That's why he was called great.

I picked up the jacket to show Armando. But he wasn't looking. Something strange had happened. He was staring instead at Tina Massin, and on his face was an expression such as I had never seen there before.

I had to catch my breath. Her head cloth had fallen back upon her neck, revealing hair so ash blond it was almost white and the perfect oval of her face. She looked like the pale, imprisoned princess in the book of Grimm's fairy tales⁶ I had when I was a kid. The impression she made upon me at that moment was one I would never forget.

Have you ever known it to happen that you see someone for the first time and in that moment you know his life story almost as though you had read it in a book? She was of foreign extraction, maybe Polish or Finnish. I guessed she had been taken from an institution or orphanage into the sheriff's establishment, as household drudge. She had no doubt first been abused and later married, because it was more convenient to own a wife than a servant. There are some women who become the hopeless, submissive captives to the most appalling men. Such a one was Tina Massin.

They were caught up in one another's

eyes, these two utterly different and contrasting strangers, the showman with the long black hair and piercing glance, the pale girl with the silken-thick hair and eyes that were for the first time alive and filled with a kind of pleading. Any moment it would become obvious that two people had found one another, had fallen in love, and were attempting to communicate.

I created a diversion by tossing the jacket back onto the desk. "That's okay," I said.

The sheriff sniggered unpleasantly. "It's the way I strap 'em into it," he said. I was satisfied to let Armando deal with that. The post-office inspector produced the mailbag. I bent over to examine the thickness, fittings, and padlock. I had a dozen keys that would open it. Armando would have two of them concealed on his person attached to a fine wire. Once out of the straitjacket, a matter of sixty seconds, he would push out the key and manipulate it, again through the material of the sack.

It was okay. Nevertheless, I made them open and shut the lock several times to make sure it hadn't been gaffed with shot or sand. Mrs. Massin dropped her handkerchief. Armando stooped to pick it up as did she. Their fingers touched for an instant. I was still bent over, examining the mailbag. I heard her whisper to him, "For God's sake, don't do it. . . ."

The time set was ten the next morning at the Western and Lakes railroad pier, where there was a big traveling crane. The document releasing the sheriff's office and Detroit police from all responsibility was

6. Grimm's fairy tales: well-known collections of stories for children—including "Snow White" and "Hansel and Gretel"—published by two German brothers, Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm.

Words
to Know
and Use

drudge (druj) *n.* someone who performs difficult, thankless work

produced, and the photographers jostled for position. Somebody handed Armando a pen. Mrs. Massin made a slight gesture with her hand. Their eyes met once more. She licked dry lips and, almost imperceptibly, shook her head. The sheriff missed the by-play, but sniggered again. "Going to welsh?"⁷ he asked and then, addressing everyone in general, said, "I say all greasers are yellow."

Joe Ferris flourished the pen dramatically. "Armando he nevaire⁸ welsh," he said and signed. The light in Tina Massin's eyes was extinguished. All the life went from her. She was hopeless, despairing, submissive. She turned and went out of the room.

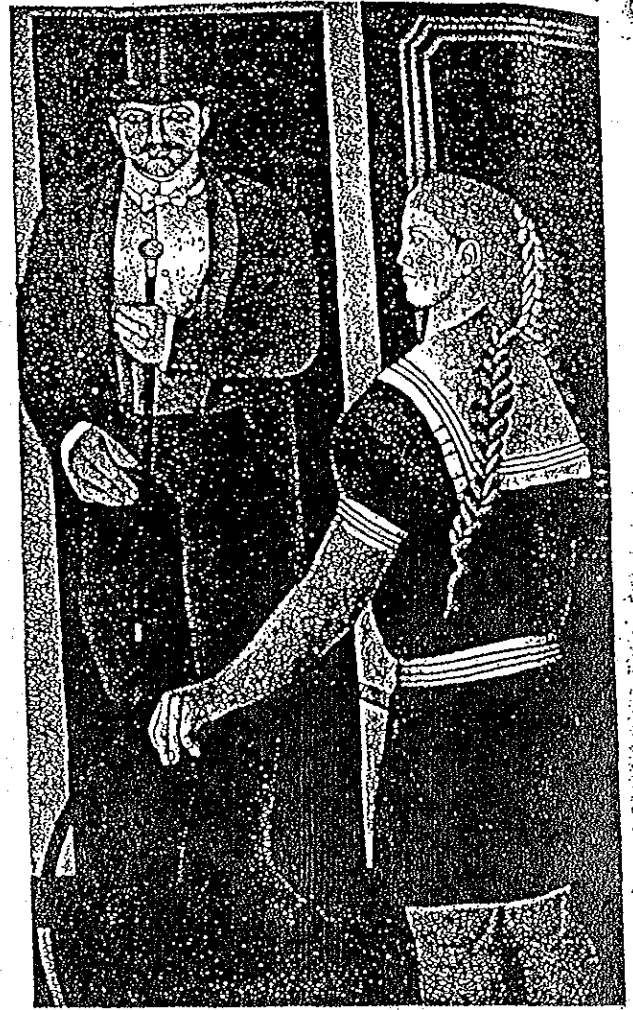
I went to see Harry Hopp, an old-time reporter friend on the *Free Press*. I told you we never left anything to chance. I didn't like the setup for two cents. I asked, "What's the background on your fragrant sheriff of Ossowo County?"

Hopp said, "Can't tell you anything good about him. And as long as you're asking, he hates carnivals and the carny crowd. They can't get the time of day in his county. You better watch out for that baby."

"Yeah," I said, "I got that. But why?"

"Shakedown," he replied. "There was a carnival through here five or six years ago really loaded with grift.⁹ They shelled out plenty to the sheriff to operate, but when he came back again for a second hand-out, they beat him up and threw him out. Maybe your boyfriend even was with the carny and saw it happen. He's death on anything connected with traveling shows or midways."

That night I said to Armando, "Lissen,



THE VISITOR 1953 Richard Lindner © 1990 ARS, New York/ADAGP.

Joe. Were you ever with a grift show that beat up a sheriff around here before you started in with me?"

He reflected and then said slowly, "So that's where I know him from. When he tried to shake me down, I poked him, and that started it."

7. welsh: slang for evade, break a promise.

8. nevaire: *dialect*, never.

9. grift: outlaw or rigged games of chance.

Words

to Know
and Use

imperceptibly (im' pər sep' tə blē) *adv.* without being noticed

I said, "I don't like it. He's got it in for you. Let's call it off. We can do it in Cleveland next week."

He looked at me as if I were out of my mind and asked, "Have we got all the angles covered?"

I went back over things in my mind. There was nothing that could happen that we hadn't thought of. "Yes," I said.

"Okay," he said, "we go. We can't afford to back out."

But I was wrong. There was something I hadn't thought of, something so simple and elementary as a means of destroying Armando that it never dawned on me until it was too late.

The day of the test was damp, cold, and sunless. There were chunks of ice floating in the river. In spite of the raw, blustery weather, the pier and several adjoining docks were black with people. We'd had a big press in advance of the attempt. . . .

The stunt was routine, and we'd done it a dozen times before. The gaff was this: as soon as they started to nail the cover onto the box, Armando would start working his way out of the straitjacket and the mailbag, while I'd stall, suggesting putting in more nails or tying the rope tighter until I got a signal from Armando that he was out of the restraints. The crate had been gimmicked by us the night before with a concealed sliding panel in one side. Fifteen seconds after the box disappeared beneath the surface, he'd be out of it.

It was that simple—like all stage or escape illusions, except it was the way Armando did it that made it look so good. It is a part of the showmanship in that kind of an act that when you really think a guy is in danger, he's as safe as he'd be at home in bed. The real deadly stuff doesn't show. Like staying under holding your breath for more than three minutes in freezing water and

then coming up amidst ice floes or risking being carried away under the ice by the current. He had a right to call himself the Great Armando and to be proud of his rep."

*She wasn't pretty anymore.
Her face was tear stained
and filled with fear.*

When Armando and I arrived, there was a big bunch of reporters including Harry Hopp, several sob sisters, a horde of photographers, and newsreel movie men. Captain Harry Stevens of the river police was giving directions to a police launch that was to pick Armando up if and when he appeared. He was not too pleased at being used for a publicity stunt and greeted us sourly. He said, "Okay, okay, let's get going and get out of here. You fellows signed a release, didn't you?"

Sheriff Massin, wearing a big sheepskin-lined coat, said, "Yup. Got it right here."

Armando slipped out of his cloak. Underneath he was wearing trousers and a sweat-shirt of light, warm wool, and sneakers. The sheriff stepped over with the straitjacket, a nasty, self-satisfied smile on his face. Tina Massin was there in the front row. She wasn't pretty anymore. Her face was tear stained and filled with fear. Her eyes were fixed upon the jacket.

I spotted something about the sleeves that had not been there the day before. My stomach started to sink. I said, "Here, wait a minute. Let me see that jacket. It's been gimmicked."

10. rep: short for reputation.

The sheriff said, "They're stalling," but handed it over.

I turned out the sleeves. Inside, ten finger grips of plaited strips of colored straw had been sewn to the canvas lining. You've seen them in any magic or trick store, or child's magic set. Once they are slipped over a finger, the harder you pull, the more tightly they grip. A device also used commercially for hoisting, there is no possible way of tearing loose from it. The secret of escape is to push against the grips. The plaits then contract and enlarge so that the finger can be removed. But fastened inside the long, narrow sleeve of the jacket, there was no leverage to push. And deprived of the use of his fingers, the Great Armando was as good as dead.

I saw Armando's eyes narrow when he saw the deadly trap and the sweat bands form on his upper lip and under his eyes. It was the first time I ever saw Joe Ferris afraid. I said, "What the hell is this? Those things weren't in there yesterday when we inspected the jacket."

Massin sniggered. "Well, they're in there now." Tina Massin seemed about to faint. I had a picture of her sitting up all night with the sheriff standing over her, sewing in those terrible devices designed to kill a man for free.

Captain Stevens came over, took the straitjacket and looked at it and the innocent-looking toy finger grips plaited in reds, yellows, greens, and purples. "What's the idea, Sheriff?" he asked.

Massin bustled truculently and replied loudly so that all the press could hear. "This feller says he can get out of anything, don't

he? I had a man once I hadda take to the loony house. Killed three guys. He got out of the jacket. He had hands like a gorilla. I fixed him up like this. He didn't get out. Okay, so let this greaseball put up or shut up. They seen them kinds of grips a dozen times before in their racket."

Captain Stevens looked doubtful, but I could sense that he was secretly pleased, in a way, that a performer who had put them to a lot of needless trouble was going to be shown up. He said to us, "What about it, boys? You don't have to go through with it if you don't want to, but make up your minds and let's get out of here."

Harry Hopp, the *Free Press* reporter, said, "Don't let him do it, Carl. It's sheer murder. I'll see that he doesn't get the worst of it in the papers."

Massin laughed his loud, dirty laugh. "I knew the four-flusher would welsh."

"Welsh nothing!" I shouted. "Our contract clearly stated—"

"Quiet, everyone!" It was Armando. And even in that crisis, he didn't forget the phony Mexican accent. "Shut up, Carl." But he wasn't looking at me. He was looking straight at Tina Massin and she at him. There was no mistake. They were in love, all right. They had found and lost each other in the same moment. They were saying goodbye, for there was no hope for them. She was the wife of a brute who would never let her go. And he was faced with an insoluble dilemma. Because if he went through with the stunt, he was a dead man, and if he backed out, he might as well be dead because he would never again be the Great Armando.

He said, "All right, Sheriff, I am ready."

The sheriff stepped forward, laughing.

Words
to Know
and Use

plaited (plā't id) *adj.* braided or interwoven plait *v.*
insoluble (in sāl' yōō bal) *adj.* unsolvable

"So long, sucker. You asked for it." Things moved fast then as he went about his for-free murder, forcing each finger of Armando's hands deep into the plaits of the straw finger grips, then pushing his knee into Armando's back in order to haul the straps tighter.

And all the time Joe Ferris continued to look only on the white face of this girl he had come to love in such a strange manner and who had been forced to become his executioner. Her eyes were lost in his. Her lips moved, though no sound came, but I would have sworn they were communicating for the last time.

When four men lifted the mailbag with Armando inside it into the packing case and the electric crane traveled over and lowered the lid into the top, Tina Massin gave a soft cry and crumpled to the pier in a dead faint. The sheriff laughed, saying, "Now, what the hell's the matter with her?" A newsreel cameraman shouted, "Hey, Sheriff, willya look out! You're in the way of the shot." I felt like it was me who was going to die.

I jumped up onto the box to stall as long as I could and give him a chance even though I knew it was hopeless. There was no signal from him as usual to let me know he was out of the jacket and sack waiting for the plunge with his finger on the gaffed panel that would slide open and free him as soon as he sank beneath the surface.

Then he hadn't got out. The child's toy had defeated him. The legend of the Great Armando was a thing of the past. But I was determined to save the life of Joe Ferris.

The sheriff cried "Lower away!" and there was a cheer from the crowd as the steel cable paid out. The weighted crate

44
went in with a splash and began to settle as the water poured in through the interstices.

I had a sickening vision of Armando trussed up like a mummy in the horrid canvas jacket, his fingers helplessly trapped in the straw grips, the icy water pouring into the case, the mail sack filling up, his last gasp for oxygen, then the hopeless, last-minute struggle, tugging against the inexorable grips, and the final bubble bursting from the tortured lungs. And after that silence.

Air was rushing up in a dirty surface swirl as the case sank with its burden. When my stopwatch showed two minutes and there was no sign of an arm or dark head breaking the gray river surface, I bawled in panic, "Haul away! Get him up out of there. Something's gone wrong! Get him up, do you hear!"

There was some confused shouting, and I could see the police captain shouting futilely at the man in the hanging operator's booth of the crane. But there was no rattle of machinery or running of steel cable over the wheel. Something had happened to the crane or the power, for I could see the operator wrestling with his levers.

I went over the side of the pier into the water. Men and women were screaming. I had a crazy idea I could swim down, work the panel, and get him out of there, sack and all, and up to the surface. I fought the cable and my bursting lungs. Then the police launch came and fished me out. After ten minutes the power came on again and the crate was raised. But there was not a chance in the world that the Great Armando was still alive. The sheriff had won.

Workmen attacked the case with axes and

Words
to Know
and Use

interstices (in ter' sta, siz'), n. cracks; crevices



crowbars. Interns from an ambulance, their white trousers showing beneath their dark overcoats, stood by with a pulmotor. With a splintering and wrenching the side of the case broke away, revealing the locked mail sack.

And I was the first one to see that it wasn't full enough!

With a yell I broke away from Harry Hopp, seized the key from the postal inspector, and opened the padlock.

It was empty! No, not quite empty. Inside, buckled as though it had never been unfastened, the terrible finger grips still in place, was the straitjacket neatly folded. But of the Great Armando there was no sign. He had accomplished his greatest escape!

It was his last, too, for he was never seen again. The police dredged, grappled, and dived for three days, but his body was never

recovered. He had defeated the vicious finger grips, the jacket, the mail sack, and the case and got out, and then perhaps at the last moment, exhausted from the struggle, his strength exhausted, he had drowned and been swept down river or under a pier.

I went to a hospital myself with pneumonia. They said I swore in my delirium I'd kill Sheriff Massin for murdering my friend and partner. It turned out it wasn't necessary. Six months after the disappearance of the Great Armando, I read in a newspaper that Jules Massin was shot to death in a saloon by the saloonkeeper he had attempted to shake down. I never heard what became of Mrs. Massin after that.

A couple of months after I got out of hospital, Captain Stevens of the river police sent me the straitjacket complete with the sheriff's deadly gaff as a souvenir.

Words
to Know
and Use

delirium (di lir' ē am) n. a state of mental confusion

couldn't bear to look at it and put it away with my diary of how it all happened, in the bottom of my trunk. Then I went back into the locksmith business.

All that was thirty years ago. Now I am holding the jacket in my fingers again, for two days ago I saw Joe Ferris, the Great Armando! And with him was Tina Massin! I'll swear it! I couldn't have been mistaken, even though his hair was white and his features changed. She looked almost the same, except happy. It was coming out of a movie house in Athens, Georgia.

I said, "Joe! Joe Ferris! And Tina Massin!"

They denied it. They stopped politely, but their expressions remained blank. The man said, "You must be mistaking us for someone else. My name is Vernon Howard, and this is Mrs. Howard here. I'm in the grain and feed business. Anyone in Athens knows me. And now if you'll excuse Mrs. Howard and myself..."

Vernon Howard's Grain and Feed Store was at the corner of Boulevard and Pecan streets. When I instituted inquiries as to how long it had been there, the invariable answer was, "Oh, 'bout as long as I kin remember..." But when I got down to cases, no one seemed to remember them back for *thirty years, or longer.*

When I returned to New York, I dug out the straitjacket of Sheriff Massin. I hadn't touched it since the day I thought it had killed the Great Armando. The color on the finger grips of plaited straw had run, but otherwise they were exactly as they had been on that fatal day. I examined them. Then I took a magnifying glass. I tried them out by putting my fingers in and yanking. They pulled loose. And after that

I knew the secret of how the Great Armando had escaped from the inescapable trap laid for him by vindictive Sheriff Massin. The finger stalls had been subtly and efficiently gaffed, by his wife.

The straw plaits had been cut with scissors in such a way as to defy casual inspection, but in every case destroying the tension of the plaits so that they no longer pulled against one another.

I remembered the look between them, the money he had stashed away in safe-deposit boxes, and his remark: "If I ever get a real scare, I'll quit and nobody'll ever hear of the Great Armando again." And how easily he could have swam ashore under cover of the panic and excitement, and vanished, to return when he read that Sheriff Massin was dead.

Yeah, we'd thought of everything, except one thing. And in the end it was Joe Ferris, the Great Armando, who had the guts to put his faith in love as a gimmick.

I N S I G H T

Love Is Not Concerned

ALICE WALKER

love is not concerned
with whom you pray
or where you slept
the night you ran away
from home
love is concerned
that the beating of your heart
should kill no one.

Words
to Know
and Use

vindictive (vin dik' tiv) adj. revengeful