

STAGE ILLUSIONS

How Some Modern Theatrical Tricks Are Done

By CAMPBELL McCULLOCH



"Dida"

WITHIN the last year a German with a glass tank, some water and two young women set all New York agog with an illusion that for a time defied solution, and about which he managed to throw a

veil of mystery that added enormously to the monetary value of the presentation. The extreme simplicity of the apparatus and the open and above-board manner in which it was shown all made for even greater success than would ordinarily have been the case, and for months the golden tide rolled into the coffers of the man from Germany.

This illusion was known as "Dida, or the Creation of a Woman Out of Nothing," and it became the gossip of the hour. Thousands flocked to see it in the vaudeville theaters at which it was shown, and the proprietor promptly constructed three other tanks, engaged six other young women and sent them to various parts of the country to gather in the dollars. The primitive construction of the whole affair and its appearance of ingenuousness went to increase its value, and yet it was so absurdly simple that a feeling of acute embarrassment comes over one when the details are made known.

To begin with, there was the aquarium of glass which rested upon an ordinary deal table. This was filled with water—some hundred gallons or so—and was rather awkwardly covered with a silken cloth. A few seconds later this cloth was drawn away, and there in the tank reposed one of the young women, resting easily in the water. The spectators were permitted a view of the front of the tank as it stood on the stage. There was nothing but glass and metal, and the tank was open and furnished no opportunity for false bottoms or mirrors. There seemed no trickery, and there appeared no possibility of trap-doors or secret panels.

The sole mystery was confined to a shelf sufficiently large to hold a human being, which was attached to the back of the table on the side farthest from the audience. This was partially hidden by the beading of the table and the beading of the tank. Together these furnished sufficient concealment for both shelf and occupant. The method of procedure was almost ludicrously easy. When the silken cover was drawn over the tank it was held up high at the rear, and under cover of this the young woman operator rose from the shelf and dropped into the water. The cover was removed and the illusion was complete. She was actually in the water, and there was no doubt as to the water being in the tank. I think the German inventor of this trick made something like a quarter of a million from the device.

The Flying Cages

ANOTHER popular stage illusion is known as "The Flying Cages." It is in the repertoire of most traveling magicians, and the results are so cleverly achieved and the effect so good that the illusion has come to be one of the most popular of the day.

The apparatus required is neither complicated nor expensive, and its operation, like all really first-class affairs of this kind, is extremely simple. It is usually effected with two cages, though it can be successfully accomplished with only one. In the first instance the requirements are two light-



ly constructed cages quadrangular in shape, with solid tops and bottoms, and each provided with a stout ring by which it may be swung clear of the floor. The four sides of each cage are provided with spring shades of a design similar to the usual window-shade. Within one cage is confined a young woman.

The structure is lifted from the floor by the ring at the top, and attention is then directed to the other compartment. The blinds on this are also lowered after the opera-

tor has apparently convinced the spectators that it is entirely empty. This too is then swung on high. Then comes the usual patter, and the first cage is lowered to the stage or slightly above it. The blinds are raised, and lo! the occupant is gone. The other apparatus is then indicated, the shades are run up from within, and there stands, apparently, the occupant of the first cage. The illusion never fails of hearty appreciation.

Again simplicity is the keynote of it all. From the two rearmost corners of each cage are hinged two sheets of mirror, arranged in such a manner that they will meet in an apex at about the center of the cage. The effect of these mirrors when so folded together is to reflect the side bars in such a manner as to convey the visual impression of the back. In the first instance the mirrors are in position when the subject is placed within. As soon as the shades are drawn, she opens these out, steps behind them, and closes them again. She is at once hidden from view. When the shades are raised she has to all intents and purposes disappeared from view.

An exactly opposite operation has been taking place in the other apparatus meanwhile. It is always the rule to employ two young women of similar appearance and costumed precisely alike, and upon this depends to a great extent the success attained. The second operator merely steps from behind her mirrors, closes them again, and when the proper time arrives releases the spring shades and stands revealed.



Occasionally the trick is varied by the use of only one cage. In this case the first operator steps behind the mirrors, and at the proper time the second appears in the rear of the theater.

This is considered one of the most successful of the magician's collection and rarely fails of its effect, though recently in New York one of the cages was dropped to the floor by accident and the trick was thus exposed.

Crack Marksmanship

SOME months ago there appeared on the American vaudeville stage a marksman who gave some highly spectacular feats of sharpshooting and fairly startled the spectators by the rapidity and accuracy of his work. His act speedily became a sensation. As a matter of fact, he was only a clever showman who had made use of the tricks of his trade in a sensational manner. One of his most emphatic successes was the making of nine bull's-eyes in four seconds from a distance of thirty feet. Of course he used a repeating rifle. The trick was so absurdly simple that it is remarkable it was not at once discovered. Anyone who can use a rifle with ordinary accuracy may duplicate it at will.

The preparations for the feat are neither costly nor complicated. To begin with, one requires a black background and a supply of small balloons such as the street vendors sell to children. These are colored black and blown up to about five inches in diameter. They are then affixed to the black background and small white spots an inch in diameter are painted on them. From a short distance it is impossible to see the outlines of the balloons, and all that is apparent is the white bull's-eyes. One has therefore a neat little invisible target of something like eighteen square inches to fire at. A shot anywhere within this radius would puncture the balloon, and with its instantaneous collapse the white target would of necessity disappear.

The extinguishing of lighted candles with a rifle is another illusion. The candles are placed in com-

partments or open boxes on a background. The whole is painted black again to mask the partitions of the boxes. At the back of each box is placed a loosely hung steel plate, suspended only by the top and free to swing slightly. Before this is placed the lighted candle, and the shooting begins. It should be remarked that these plates are six inches square, and consequently give an area of thirty-six square inches to shoot at. When a rifle bullet strikes a plate anywhere the concussion of air caused by the quick movement of the plate in response to the impact of the bullet blows out the candle instantly, and the interesting trick is accomplished.

The old familiar trick of shooting glass balls thrown in the air is believed to be done with a rifle. It is usually, but the rifle invariably carries no solid ball, but a special cartridge filled with a good charge of bird-shot which scatter wonderfully when released from the gun.

On the vaudeville stage one frequently sees lumps of sugar shot from the head of an accomplice. Here it is again that the small balloons come into play, but in this instance they have a white square painted upon them to represent the sugar loaf.

At present there are several "experts" in this line who perform a curious feat of disrobing an assistant with rifle bullets. In this feat the garments are made in two halves, the front and the back, and are fastened together with thin glass globes about two and one-half inches in diameter. These globes are of dark material, and upon them are painted the usual white spots, and as the subject invariably stands against a black background the result may be imagined. There is nothing at all difficult in the act for anyone who can shoot reasonably straight.

Nearly everyone has seen marvelous revolver shooting at moving targets. This is generally accomplished with cartridges filled with bird-shot also.

The Basket Trick

YEAR ago returning travelers from India used to regale their friends with the wonders of the famous "basket" trick, which, with its many variations, all of them simple, is the commonest of all stage illusions of to-day. Those who have seen it will remember that the subject is generally bound with a net and placed upon the mouth of the basket. The lid is then laid upon his back and the whole is covered with an ample cloth. Spasmodic quiverings shake the cloth, and from one side the net is tossed. Suddenly the cover drops with a clatter and the cloth is removed. To all intents and purposes the subject has disappeared and the basket is empty. A naked sword thrust in and through the sides is provocative of nothing like screams, and the operator, having apparently demonstrated to everyone's satisfaction that the basket is empty, replaces the cover and the cloth and waits patiently. Soon the quivering takes place again and the cover is thrown off. Then appears the subject, safe and sound.

The explanation of this form of the trick is simply that when the subject freed himself from the net he curled up around the outside edges of the basket and remained quiescent while his companion stabbed the empty space with the sword. When it came time for him to put in his reappearance, he simply unwound himself from his position and stood up.

The Chinese Magician

MANY theatergoers will remember the performances of Ching Ling Foo, the Chinese magician

