

# Man Who Manages Magicians Made First Chinese Talkie

By J. Gifford Male

If you're ever playing cards with Charles Hugo, don't forget yourself and slip him a couple from the bottom of the pack. He has probably seen that trick done before.

And, whatever you do, don't air your knowledge of parlour magic. He has probably seen most of that done before, too.

For, Mr. Hugo is the man who looks after the business side of Nicola, the magician who is so very successfully and profitably puzzling New Zealand audiences just now. Managing magicians is his speciality, and he has been doing it upwards of 20 years.

So the chances are the tricks and illusions he hasn't seen are not worth seeing.

FOR both Nicola and Mr. Hugo this present tour is a significant one. For both of them it is their last. After long, strenuous careers they are retiring, Mr. Hugo to an orange grove in California, and Nicola to a little farm in the middle-west of the U.S. where he hopes to raise a few pigs and carry out private experiments in magic.

And this tour is all the more a sentimental journey for them since it was Mr. Hugo who managed the first tour Nicola ever made.

Mr. Hugo hails from Chicago, and was studying medicine when

Japan that Mr. Hugo has not visited at one time or another.

With Nicola he played in Peking when that ancient city was closed to the outside world. He even planned once to tour Tibet, but the British authorities in India refused to allow him to leave through the Khyber Pass.

Everywhere he goes in the East a magician is a welcome and honoured guest; the language of magic is an international one, and seldom is an interpreter needed. Often, too, local magicians find their own magic served up to them, embellished, spectacularised, and always vastly improved.

## The Mango Tree

THUS with the mango tree trick. It's a poor European magician who can't make a healthy young mango tree grow from a bare stage in less time than the average Yogi would take to do it.

One of Nicola's best tricks (and one of his most jealously guarded) is a version of the Indian rope trick.

A bare stage, a rope is flung into the air. It stays upright, the end drooping over. A boy climbs up and disappears into thin air. Presto! He is back on the stage.

It is perhaps the most celebrated trick of all, and every time he has visited India Mr. Hugo has done a little research into the mystery of the original fabled Yogi trick.

Believe it or not, he has never found a Yogi or local magician who could do it. He has never even met anybody who has seen it done. He has met somebody who has met somebody who has

He cuts the cockerel's head off, flings the head into one basket and the body into another. Similarly, with the duck. But the assistant, foolish fellow, gets the latter end of the trick mixed up. The cockerel runs frantically off the stage with the duck's head; the duck waddles away with the cockerel's comb.

Nicola has also improved on the old trick of levitation. A beautiful female form not only lifts itself into the air, but a clap of the hands from Nicola and it disappears completely, where to, and how, Heaven and Nicola alone know.

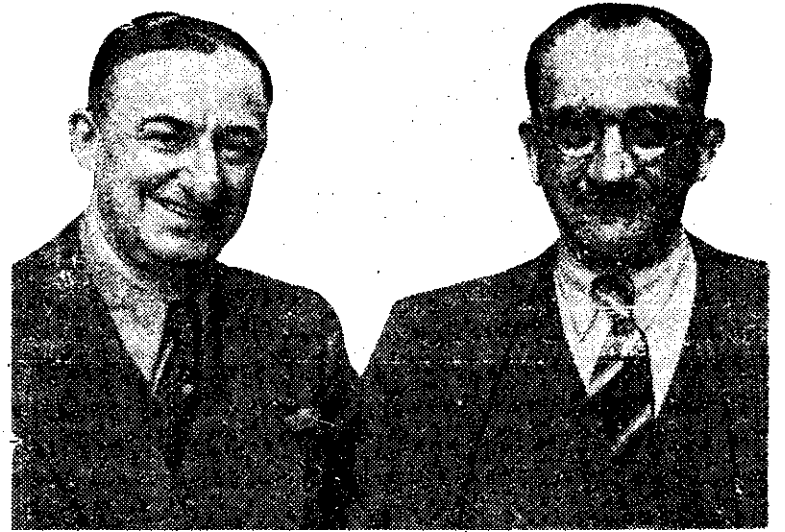
Nicola used to specialise in escapes, and he claims to have made more than Houdini ever did. Last time he visited Auckland (in 1929) he caused a sensation and a traffic block by escaping from a regulation strait-jacket while suspended by the feet, high in the air outside a Queen Street theatre.

And for six weeks in Johannesburg once, Nicola accepted a challenge every night. Gaols, pianos, double-sealed coffins, he escaped from them all.

But he's a little old for escapes now, Mr. Hugo explained. Besides, escapes always seem to cause traffic congestion, and the police don't like them.

## "Palmy Days"

THE golden age of magic has passed, says Mr. Hugo ruefully; 1908 to 1912 were perhaps the palmy days, to coin a very bad pun. Few of the magicians who flourished then—Nicola, Dante, Carter the Great,



★MAGICIAN AND HIS MANAGER.—On the left is ★ Nicola, "hero of a thousand thrilling escapes," and on the right, Charles Hugo.

driven a Hollywood producer crazy.

## Studio in Chapei

CHIEF difficulty was language.

Many dialects are spoken throughout China, all of them distinct languages. At first the solution seemed to be the use of Mandarin, China's one universal language, but the first picture made, "Romance of the Opera," proved conclusively that Mandarin is spoken only by educated, higher-class Chinese, too few of China's millions.

Subsequent pictures were made in Cantonese, explanatory captions being added for other provinces.

But one factor Mr. Hugo had not taken into account when he established his Chinese Hollywood. That factor was Japan.

The studios were located in the part of Shanghai known as Chapei, and as you may remember, a few years ago several thousand Japanese soldiers landed near Shanghai and proceeded to blow certain portions of the city (including Chapei) sky-high.

And so it happened that one day a high-explosive shell landed in Mr. Hugo's studios, with disastrous consequences for the motion picture industry in China.

Still, it was worth while, Mr. Hugo observes philosophically. And after all, he did make the first Chinese talkie.



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MOSES, who changed a walking stick into a serpent before the very eyes of Pharaoh's startled court, was one of the first magicians, and one of the best showmen of all time. And it's a safe bet (though the request was not recorded) that when they had recovered from their surprise, the Egyptians clamoured for an encore so they could have a shot at puzzling out the trick.

A magician appeals to instincts that have survived from the childhood of the race—awe at something not apparently explainable by natural laws; curiosity as to how it's done; delight in the very fact of being mystified. A magician, axiomatically, is a very wise person. If he is no longer suspected of collusion with supernatural and unhallowed powers, he is, nevertheless, the repository of some surprising secrets. And if a magician is a "wise guy," how very sagacious must be a magician's manager.

he met up with a magician who was travelling under the name of Carter the Great, and went into the theatrical business instead.

That was in 1908, and in the meantime he has managed pretty near every worth-while magician who has ever seen a woman in two. First he managed was Carter the Great, who died two years ago in Bombay, India, at the age of 65 (his son is in two minds about carrying on); then Nicola; then that famous trio, Leroy, Talma and Basco (Talma worked in the stalls, Leroy in the dress circle and Basco, who did all the clowning, in the gallery); then Dante, who is now in England (he toured originally under the name of Jansen, and has a daughter in Auckland, married to a well-known importer, Harold Haines); then Blackstone; then that agile Oriental, Long Tack Sam, who is now living in Austria.

India and the Orient are traditionally the home of magic, and there are few corners of India, Burma, Malay, Siam, China, and

seen it done, but with the scientific integrity of the true investigator, he holds that that isn't good enough.

Another Yogi trick which Nicola has improved on is the restoration to life of the dead chicken.

In his fascinating book, "Search in Secret India," Paul Brunton relates that one of the Yogi manifestations of power which impressed him most was the revival of a dead sparrow.

The bird's neck is wrung; it is left for an hour or so, obviously dead. The Yogi then focuses the sun's rays on to it through a glass. The sparrow comes to life, flies round.

## An Improvement

NICOLA does it with a duck and a young cockerel (there's really no need for the S.P.C.A. to get alarmed; they should see the trick before they pass judgment), and Nicola goes a lot farther than Paul Brunton's Yogi.

Maskelyne and Devant, Leroy, Talma and Basco—are left, and today there are probably no more than half a dozen men capable of putting on a two-hour show single-handed.

Escorting magicians round the world has not been Mr. Hugo's only connection with the theatre, however. He was responsible for introducing the first American theatrical company to the Orient.

It was in 1934, and the company was the Marcus Show.

It was almost the same Marcus Show which took New Zealand by storm last year—Ben McAttee, Leon Miller, Hotcha San and those Marcus Peaches were all there.

And did the Japanese relish the Marcus Peaches! The show played three months in one theatre in Tokyo.

Another little venture of Mr. Hugo's was the establishing in Shanghai of studios for the production of Chinese talkies.

Mr. Hugo provided the studios and a Hollywood technical staff; China provided the actors and some problems which would have