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DAI VERNON: A BIOGRAPHY

Artist • Magician • Muse | 1894 - 1941

by David Ben

A Master of Magic Revealed

By Daniel Stashower, a member of the Society of American Magicians for more than 25 years. His new book, "The Beautiful Cigar Girl," will be published in October

On the night of Feb. 6, 1922, more than 60 magicians in formal attire gathered at a hotel banquet room in Chicago to honor Harry Houdini, the self-styled "eclipsing sensation of the world." Then as now, such banquets were little more than an excuse for magic enthusiasts to show off, often at considerable length. So it was past 3:30 a.m. before Houdini himself was finally invited to perform. He was 48 at the time, but that evening he reached back to his earliest days as a "King of Cards" and treated the room to a flashy display of card fans, waterfalls and other flourishes. The audience responded with a warm ovation.

As the applause died down, a man named Sam Margules took Houdini by the arm and led him across the room. Margules wanted Houdini to see a gifted young performer, Dai Vernon, whom he considered the finest sleight-of-hand artist he'd ever known. "Houdini glanced at Vernon, sizing the newcomer up," writes David Ben in this fascinating and fast-moving biography. "Vernon was fit and agile. He had the body of an athlete and was dressed smartly in suit and tie. Without a word, Vernon knew what trick Sam wanted him to demonstrate. Vernon took out a pack of cards, Aristocrats, printed in cool blue with white borders. He removed the cards from the case, placed the card case on the banquet table, and spread the pack between his hands. The cards seemed to dance in perfect alignment, moving gracefully from one palm to the other. Houdini glanced at Sam as if he were doing him a huge favor."

Houdini would have done better to escape while he had the chance. As Ben recounts the scene, Vernon's performance that night helped to create one legend at the expense of another. Houdini liked to boast that he could not be fooled if he had the opportunity to see a trick performed three times running. Vernon's effect, in which a signed card inexplicably rose to the top of the pack, left the escape artist completely flummoxed. Vernon obligingly repeated the trick a second time, and then a third. The author adroitly chronicles the rising tension as Houdini's mood darkened: "Pride was the real secret to Houdini's success," Ben

writes. "His determination, the unwillingness to admit defeat at any cost, was what motivated him." After six repetitions of the trick, however, Houdini still couldn't puzzle it out. Margules, failing to grasp the threat to Houdini's ego, attempted a gentle ribbing: "Admit it, Harry, he's got you." The escape artist, unwilling to concede, simply turned and walked out of the room. Thereafter, Vernon billed himself as "The Man Who Fooled Houdini."

It was to be just one of Vernon's many incarnations -- prodigy, midway huckster, artist, author, inventor and headliner. At his death in 1992, at the age of 98, Vernon had spent three decades as the "magician-in-residence" at Hollywood's famed Magic Castle and had been an active performer for just over 90 years. (He was fond of saying that he had wasted the first seven years of his life.) To fellow performers he was known simply as "The Professor." A recent poll in a popular magic journal placed him at No. 2 on a list of the most influential performers of the 20th century -- second only to Houdini.

David Ben is himself a talented and well-regarded magician -- his author photo shows him in the throes of swallowing a handful of needles -- and he brings an insider's perspective to the task as he traces Vernon's wildly adventurous career and his pivotal role in the development of modern magic. "Magic has produced very few 'artists,'" Ben has said. "The few artists we have need to be celebrated." Nevertheless, Ben takes care to present the story here to appeal to insiders and laymen alike.

A key moment in Ben's biography comes when the 21-year-old Vernon arrives in New York for the first time in 1915 and presents himself at Clyde Powers's Magic Shop on West 42nd Street. After dazzling the owner with a pack of cards, Vernon receives the ultimate blessing: "Young man," says Powers, "make this place your home. We have a back room; when Kellar or Ching Ling Foo, or Houdini, Dr. Elliott or any of these well-known magicians are in New York, they don't stay out in front here, they walk in the back room. This is the inner sanctum. . . . You can go back there whenever you like." Throughout the book the reader experiences a similar thrill, the sense of passing into a realm of secrets.

Vernon was also the subject of last year's "The Magician and the Cardsharp," by Karl Johnson, a hugely entertaining account of his quixotic search for gambler Allen Kennedy, who was said to have perfected the seemingly impossible art of dealing from the center of the deck. Ben's book places that episode and many others in the larger context of Vernon's eventful life and times -- a canvas so large, apparently, that it can't be contained in a single volume. The current book, covering the years from 1894 to 1941, is only the first of two installments. It ends as the 47-year-old Vernon, while working a construction job in New York, plunges six stories into the East River. He wakes up in Bellevue Hospital to learn that his right arm has become gangrenous. A doctor steps forward to ask for permission to amputate.

With that, Ben brings down the curtain on his first act. It's a slick move -- one that "The Professor" himself might have appreciated.