

## Chinese Puzzles, Tricks, and Traps.

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY JAMES SCOTT.



THE Chinese affair being, so to speak, red-hot at the present moment, and demanding the concentrated attention of the whole world, it has seemed to me to offer a favourable

opportunity for displaying some examples of Chinese ingenuity which have been encountered in my researches. My chief concern is to afford as fresh material as it has been possible for me to secure.

The Chinese have frequently been referred to with contemptuous emphasis as barbarians, but, however much in a moral sense of the word they deserve the repugnant appellation, I am sure that, as regards purely mental attributes, they are and have been pre-eminently conspicuous.

But to discuss this phase of their character further would be beyond the scope of this particular article. Therefore I will proceed to my immediate subject.

The magical growing of plants from earth in which apparently nothing but a single seed has been secreted is a fairly favourite one among Oriental wizards. Whilst not claiming to explain accurate details of all these varieties of trickery, it is at any rate possible for me to convey a description of the mysterious mechanism by which one of them is managed by the Chinese — a method quite different from that employed by the Hindus.

A pot or vase (Fig. 1) is introduced for the inspection of the audience. It is empty — at least to a goodly depth, beyond which

it is solid. With vociferous ejaculations the wizard proceeds to fill it with earth, in which he embeds a seed. A silken handkerchief is then shaken out and displayed, and when the onlookers are satisfied that it is inoffensive as regards deception, it is neatly placed over the pot. Finally, the conjurer nips the middle

of the handkerchief between his thumb and forefinger, and slowly raises it, when, lo! there blossoms, as though in defiance of all Nature's laws, a full-blown and genuine-looking flowering plant of picturesquely large size. You finger it and find it to be moist, while you keenly

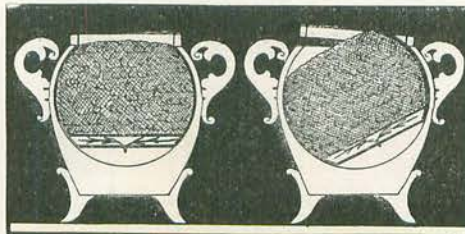
observe that the delicate flower bears some pollen-dust. How on earth did the thing get there? I will tell you.

Whatever may be the outer shape of the pot, the chief portion of its interior is globular, and within this globular space there revolves a hollow sphere, with a cross-central partition, dividing it into two very unequal compartments (Fig. 2). The upper compartment thus formed is filled with new mould, and into this the seed is thrown. The two pivots on which the inside sphere revolves are connected with springs; whilst the neck of the vase can be raised on hinges like a skeleton lid. At the moment the conjurer covers the apparatus with the handkerchief he slyly causes one part of the neck to be momentarily raised, and this action permits the inside sphere to rotate quickly so as to completely invert it, bringing the small compartment uppermost.

In this position the earth which has



1.—A MAGICALLY GROWN PLANT.



2.—EXPLANATION OF THE MAGIC PLANT.



become revealed, although resembling that which it has replaced, is really only a thin layer stuck to a circular board, having in its centre a hole through which projects just the tiniest bit of a folded, artificially prepared, plant. This botanical curiosity is contained within the hitherto lower (now upper) compartment.

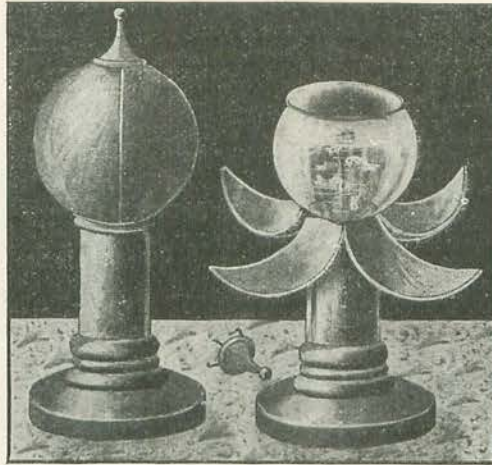
Whilst removing the coverlet the performer deftly seizes the protruding end of the plant, which is thus literally pulled out of the ground, and expands by unfolding mechanically. Each leaf and petal of this extraordinary plant is composed of two skins, between which are elastic or spring veins. The veins permit them to be folded individually into halves, and over one another so as to occupy the minutest possible amount of space; yet when all parts are expanded the veins are so rigid as to impart quite a stiff and life-like appearance to them.

Another extraordinarily effective illusion is a disappearing globe of live fish. An elegant contrivance is placed upon the performer's table, and consists of a stout pedestal to properly support the undue weight—as impressively explained by the conjurer—with a four-leaved, or four-flapped, ball. A retaining knob is released, and the flaps fall down and outwards. Then an empty fragile globe is brought in and disposed pompously upon the summit of the upright. Afterwards water is gently poured into it, and a few gold-fish inserted (Fig. 3). To prove that the creatures are fully alive, and no mere pieces of mechanical trickery, they may be first handed round in a different receptacle, or allowed to flop and frisk about on the table for a few

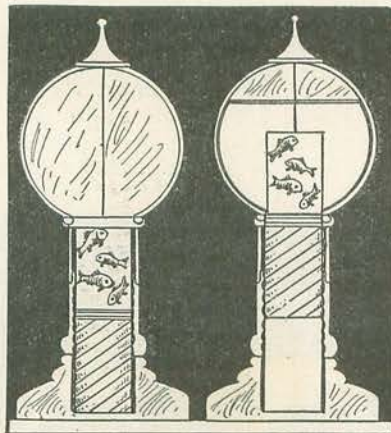
seconds. But when all is ready the wooden ball is closed, a touch given with the wand, and then the receptacle again opened. There is then neither glass globe, fish, nor water to be observed. Truly a wonderful disappearance! Water, especially, is a peculiar thing to conjure with; yet there is no sign of wet anywhere. The liquid cannot be palmed or smuggled up one's sleeves.

But let me tell you that the glass globe is a base deceiver. It is really made in four sections to correspond in width and contour with the flaps of the wooden ball, and is held together with elastic rings round its stumpy neck and at a lower edge. It is quite devoid of all semblance to a bottom. The dividing lines in it cannot be detected because of the brilliancy of the performer's light and the position of the article as it faces the

onlookers. The stout standard or pedestal of the apparatus is hollow, and contains in one part a very thin glass jar, which can be raised above the level of the top—i.e., within the closed wooden globe—by a twist of one of the rings which appear to consist of mere turnery (Fig. 4). Just as the seat of a music-stool may be raised by rotating the screw, so does this ring actuate on a screw-piece. Thus, while the globe is being apparently filled with water, and fish placed in it, it is in reality only the surreptitiously introduced jar that is being occupied, and this is, of course, lowered down into the pillar-standard in the same way that it was caused to appear. The insides of the globular box having previously been prepared with a sticky, shining substance on a black ground to resemble polished ebony, the neatly loosed por-



3.—A DISAPPEARING GLOBE OF LIVE FISH.

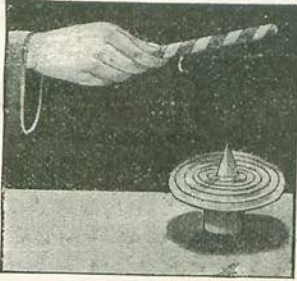


4.—EXPLANATION OF THE DISAPPEARING GLOBE OF FISH.



tions of the glass globe adhere to them after the retaining elastic rings have been removed by catches which can be shot out of the fastening knob; and when the leaves are lowered they consequently fall with them.

Here is another device. Half-a-dozen thin metal discs of graduated sizes, provided with tube attachments so that they may be fitted telescopically one inside another, are handed round, detached for scrutiny, so that



5.—THE MAGIC DISCS.

a manifestation may be made that there are no concealed springs or catches upon them. Then the performer inserts them one within another, and places them on his table. Whilst his wand is circling about mysteriously the telescopic arrangement slowly and gracefully erects itself into an extended position, the portions completely raised one over another (Fig. 5).

Without any other perceptible personal contact, the conjurer strikes each disc violently in succession, and soon the whole six are rotating with startling velocity. At the word of command, and while still careering round and round, the pile slowly descends, and may be again examined, without success, for clues as to why they could be made to undergo such antics.

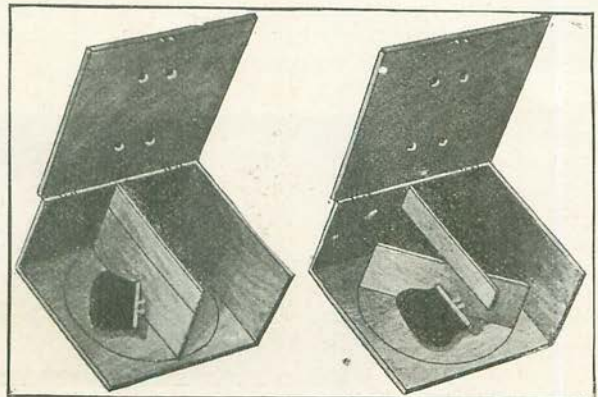
The secret is this: A tightly-wedged roll of prepared material is placed within the bottom segment of the telescope when it is being placed on the table. A rolled-up tape-measure may be taken as a good likeness. The inner or immediately central end of the roll has a pointed catch bearing a small coil of fine strong silk or catgut, as preferred. While the telescope remains folded the catch is dexterously pulled through the conical top segment and hitched on to

the performer's robe somewhere in the region of his chest. He thus has one end of a thread attached to himself and the other end united to the inner end of the roll that lies within the collapsed telescope. As he majestically raises his fantastic wand the latter (unnoticed, of course, by the audience) comes into contact with the thread and withdraws it, and as a consequence extends the concealed roll, which, by opening out to resemble a barber's pole, elevates and supports the telescope and its accompanying discs, which are then enabled to revolve in the curious manner described.

By removing the catch from his robe and letting it adhere to his wand he can cause the pile to descend, this movement being accelerated by means of a properly-fitted spring arrangement inside the roll.

You must have seen old-fashioned entertainers pull yard after yard of coloured paper from their mouths. This is done with a roll of material just like that referred to here. In fact, such a device is widely used for producing various effects.

Another deceptive trifle, which notwithstanding its bareness of construction is essentially clever, is the magic box illustrated in Fig. 6. A person is invited to deposit some small article of whose *bonâ-fide* formation or composition he will be perfectly assured into either selected compartment of a double box, the lid of which bears exterior numbers or signs, by reference to which the particular compartment may be identified. In order to secure additional confidence from the audience, there exist four holes completely through the lid —



6.—A VERY EFFECTIVE BOX TRICK.



two covering each compartment. You are at liberty to use your judgment or discretion concerning whether you shall or shall not dispose of a pair of pegs through these holes, each peg being of sufficient length to extend to a depth of a few inches within the interior of the article. At all events, you can satisfy yourself respecting the identical division in which you secrete a handkerchief, a watch, or a

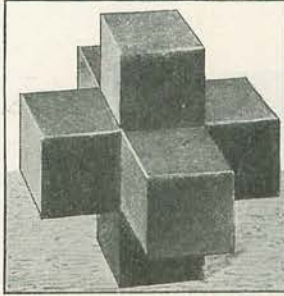
purse. Permission is also granted to turn the key and lock the contrivance. Then, after the orthodox ceremonies of concealing it beneath a cloth, tapping with a wand, and subsequently removing the coverlet, the box is unlocked and the lid raised, when the onlooker discovers that his property has been cleverly transferred to the fellow-compartment. Naturally, some people think that the lid veils the chief part of the problem, and that the numbers and pegs have been tampered with. But the truth is delightfully easy of description.

The bottom of the box is of a double thickness, the upper slice being composed of a circular board revolving flush in the remainder. The disc is attached to a very neatly separated portion of the middle upright partition. Thus, one compartment practically revolves round and replaces the other. The revolution is accomplished when the key is turned.

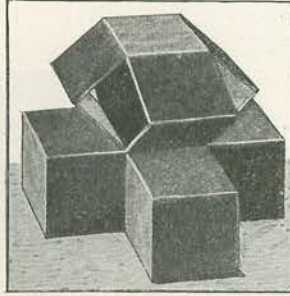
It hardly needs mentioning that the lines of the detached circle and upright would not be allowed to show so conspicuously as illustrated in Fig. 6. Of course, some intricate geometrical

pattern, or painted sprays of flowers, would cover the interior of the box and efface the lines of separation.

A geometrical puzzle of a purely toyish character is shown in Fig. 7.



7.—A TANTALIZING PUZZLE.



that they would be bewildered in regard to it. The cross is proved to contain something or other—perhaps a marble. To secure the contents, all that is necessary is to pull downwards a four-blocked portion, having previously slid outwards to a slight extent a tiny flap that defies detection on account of neat-

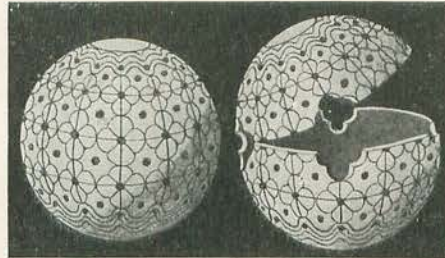
ness of joinery. This enables the remainder to be collapsed, when access is gained as desired to the small interior.

Even if a clue to the exact movement is conjectured, the manipulator is confronted with the tiresome fact that there are three crosses combined together,

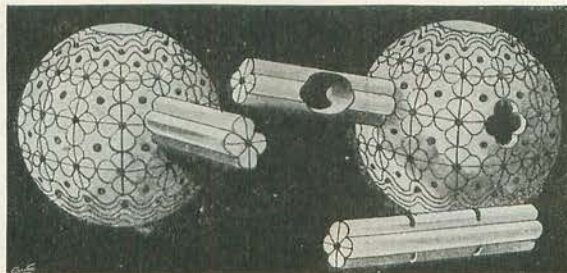
and while he thought he was pushing each down in succession he might merely be repeating unavailing endeavours. As a rule, people try with this puzzle such methods as pulling apart, turning the blocks round, or pushing them inwards. Perhaps with the grasp of one hand they may resist their own

efforts made simultaneously with the other hand.

A distinctly clever puzzle, in the form of a globular trinket casket, is shown in Figs. 8, 9, and 10, and is beautifully made in ivory.

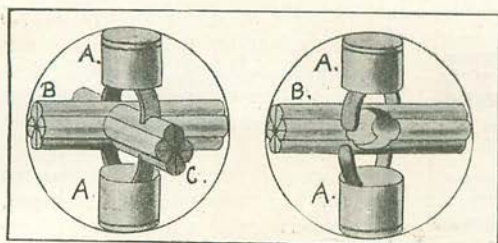


8.—A PUZZLE TRINKET CASSET—SHUT AND OPEN.



9.—OPENING THE CASSET.





10.—EXPLANATION OF THE CASKET TRICK.

It is guaranteed to defy the acutest penetration. Being covered entirely over its surface with a tracery of lines assuming a network pattern, it is thereby rendered more difficult of solution. To those who relish these curiosities the sub-descriptive details may prove interesting. The globe is essentially a hinged box, as shown in the right-hand half of Fig. 8. Occupying an exact central position in each half is a kind of reel (A) (Fig. 10), which revolves as a fixture in a hole. A pair of catches issue from the interior end of each reel and fit into slots on a movable rod (C), which rod itself can slide through the one which helps it to form a cross (B). To solve the puzzle, each reel has to be slightly turned by pressure upon its exterior surface with a thumb and finger in order to remove the catches from C. This accomplished, it is then quite an easy matter to withdraw C frontwards, and thus allow B to be extricated sideways, when the box can be properly opened on its hinges. A slight study of the mechanism will reveal that, notwithstanding its apparent simplicity, it is so arranged as to afford a really effective bar against opening the casket until *all* its movements have been discovered and made.

The extraordinary bicycle portrayed in Fig. 11 in various phases of its evolution is a really unique piece of work, and was shown to me by one of the members of a firm who make a

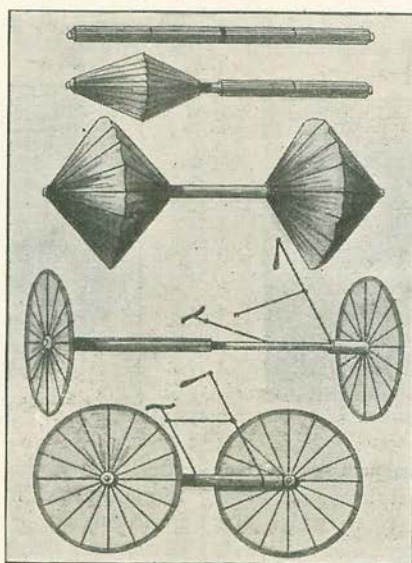
speciality of importing Chinese and Japanese furniture and similar goods. Nothing more than a fragile bundle of sticks is placed in your hands; yet they may be converted into a passable machine—not intended for use, of course, as you will readily conceive. You push two halves of certain parts in opposite directions, the motions resembling the opening of a double Oriental umbrella. Eventually you secure the equivalent of two wheels, which need just a slight turn (properly arranged for) to bring them into line with the developing framework. There is then disclosed to view a divided tube, with some intermediate rods, which need raising.

Then, when this has been accomplished, the two segments of the tube are closed up into mutual contact, and certain fastenings hitched into position. In this very unusual way an interesting trick toy-bicycle is composed.

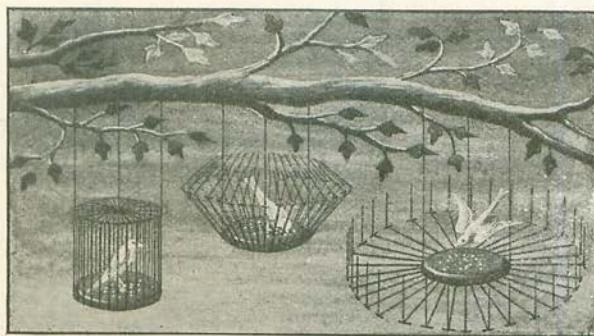
I have shown the parts forming the wheels as though papered completely all over their areas. This has been done to avoid confusion of comprehension—if I may be permitted to use a rather Irish remark. Actually, only the semblance of a rim or tyre is represented in paper.

For the purpose of entrapping rare or shy

small birds in their native haunts, the device illustrated in Fig. 12 seems admirably adapted. Many birds confine themselves (when man is about) almost solely to



11.—THE EVOLUTION OF A BICYCLE.

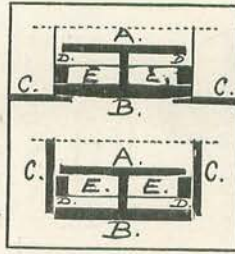


12.—VARIOUS PHASES OF A BIRD-TRAP.



the foliage of their beautiful abodes, and get scared away if sought for by climbers. Hence the unsuspecting-looking trap, baited with some attractive seed, is suspended high up among the branches to await developments. When a bird alights with sufficient force upon the prepared part of the object the outstanding circling of slender bars quickly rises simultaneously into an upright position and imprisons the intruder.

For the edification of those readers who care to pry further into the details of the apparatus I have given some diagrams in Fig. 13. Those to whom they may appear to be tiresome may pass over the next paragraph.

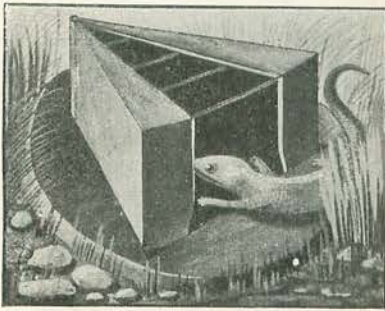


13.—EXPLANATION OF THE TRAP.

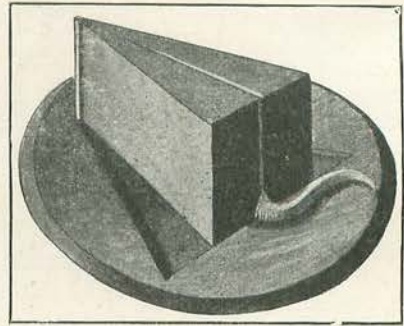
inner ends of the trap-bars (c) immediately jerks those bars into a vertical position, from which they cannot be liberated by any accidental movements of the captive.

A very ingenious arrangement for the purpose of capturing lizards and similar fry is exhibited in Figs. 14 and 15. The principle of this artful object may be more clearly

understood from an inspection of the diagrammatic sketch Fig. 16. This reveals a certain number of wooden bars pivoted together, so as to be collapsible. The opened-out portions of the V are connected together with pieces of elastic of sufficient strength to hold the contrivance tightly closed



14.—A LIZARD TRAP—SET.

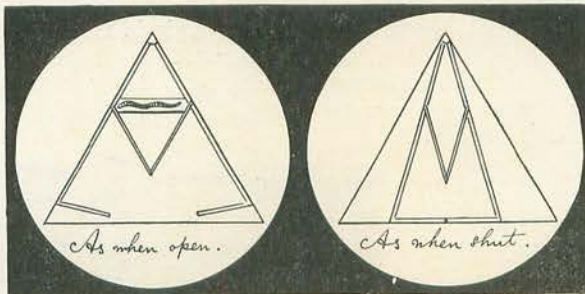


15.—A LIZARD TRAP—CLOSED.

The pressure of the bird causes a disc (E) to slip downwards until its lower edge rests upon a bottom ring (D) to which the trap-bars are either hinged or pivoted. Meanwhile the descent of the disc E has resulted in the simultaneous depression of a lower one (B), which, by pushing down the

after the bait has been removed. The trap is maintained in an open condition by the insertion (within the diamond-shaped opening) of a small glass tube containing a wriggling

worm or a moth. The removal of this tube permits the whole affair to snap and make a prisoner of the lizard.



16.—EXPLANATION OF THE LIZARD TRAP.