VERNON

THE MAN WHO FOOLED HOUDINI

by David Ben

1919

HIS BUSINESS CARD may have described his profession as "Silhouettest" and listed his address as 88 MacLaren Street, Ottawa, but Vernon's heart was in the United States, the country where, in his mind, fortunes could be made or lost based on ability, not social standing. His brother Napier, now home from the war, could attend to their mother and younger brother. It was time to return to America and assert his independence just as Canada had asserted its own administrative independence from Great Britain during the course of the war. Vernon headed for Chicago, home to several magic shops, including Roterberg's, whose catalogue he had ordered as a youth. Chicago was also a hotbed of illicit gambling and had two major supply houses that outfitted professionals with marked cards, loaded dice, and machines—secret apparatus designed to switch cards into and out of play—as well as furniture, tables, and playing surfaces designed to provide the owner with an operational advantage. In addition, the city was the home of Frederick J. Drake & Co., the publishing house responsible for distributing *The Expert At The Card Table*, and the last known address of its author. Later, Vernon recalled:

OF COURSE, I was curious to know who Erdnase was,

and years later when I went to Chicago, there was a fellow named Myers (he used the name John C. Sprong) who worked in the Post Office having a job where he used to check when the trucks come in or something. He sat in a little cubicle and he had plenty of time to practice cards. He became an expert card manipulator. Naturally, he was a student of Erdnase, which was the best textbook on cards written up to that date. He said he found out from Drake, who was one of the later publishers of Erdnase that Erdnase is Andrews spelled all mixed up. His real name was Andrews. [Sprong] asked Mr. Drake "who this fellow Andrews was, and he said he was sorry, he couldn't tell me. So I went back there religiously for months and kept badgering the old man to tell me something about this Andrews. He said he couldn't betray a confidence and couldn't tell anything about Andrews."

Although he was unable to learn more about Andrews, Vernon still had extraordinary luck for someone so obsessed with manipulating it. While he was sitting at a checkerboard in a hotel lobby, a man of Eastern European descent, either Hungarian or Czechoslovakian, approached and asked if Vernon wanted to play a game. As the two played, one word led to another, and Vernon confessed that he was interested in gambling and cards. The man responded that the interest was mutual. He himself gambled a great deal, and told Vernon that he knew a lot of people who could do good second and bottom deals. Cheats often share information with each other. They have few to confide in and constantly search for new techniques to augment their arsenal. Vernon would comment,

This is a strange thing but it's something the public doesn't really know. Only the ones that are inside, in the racket themselves, understand how this work is done. Now as a rule they don't confide in magicians at all. If they do they have a pseudo explanation of how the thing is done or they throw him off. But I've enjoyed the confidence of a lot of these fellows because I have had things that they want to learn themselves, that they think they can adapt to the card table, and as a consequence they're greedy for money, they will show something, in other words to get something from me.

Vernon discovered that his opponent could do some very fine things with a deck of cards. His was a level of expertise Vernon had not encountered in years, and then perhaps only once or twice before. The cheat had learned his technique in Europe, from his father, who was also a card player. The cheat was rather self-effacing: "If you want to see some great work," he said, "you ought to see 'Old Dad Stevens'."

Dai and his wife Jeanne at The Little Blue Bookshop in Atlantic City, summer of 1924

Vernon as a boy, and with his father

"Who," Vernon asked, "is 'Old Dad Stevens'?"

The names of gamblers are bandied about the profession. Vernon was surprised he had never heard the name before. He pressed the man for more information. He learned Stevens was a regular at the Waiters' Club on State Street. Stevens played cards there most Saturday nights and he never lost.

Vernon asked, "Is he a waiter?"

The man replied, "Hell, no, why should he be a waiter? He's worth over a half a million dollars."

Vernon replied, "Then what's he doing at the Waiters' Club?"

"Oh," the cheat said, "he likes to play cards. He comes down there every Saturday night and trims all the waiters. He beats them all."

Vernon asked, "Well, how can they stand for this every Saturday night, being beaten?"

The man said, "They think they'll catch him sometime. They just say, 'Well, Stevens, I know you're doing something, but I can't see what you're dong.' That's how good he is; they can't catch him."

Vernon asked, "Is there any chance I'd be able to meet this fellow?"

Unfortunately the man was leaving town and unable to escort Vernon to the club. He told Vernon to just walk in. No one would bother him. He could just hang around. He then described Stevens, "He's an old guy; he's the oldest one in there—probably seventy-four or five years old—very quiet looking fellow. He is rather thin and wears a derby hat."

That Saturday, Vernon headed for Waiters' Club, spotted an old guy with a derby hat, and explained how he had met a gambler while playing checkers and how he had heard that a Mr. Stevens never lost playing cards. The man acknowledged that he was Mr. Stevens and that he knew the gambler Vernon spoke of, but had not seen him in a while.

Vernon said, "Well, I'm very interested in cards. In fact, it's almost a mania with me. I hear you do some things with cards that are quite unusual."

Stevens looked at Vernon, and he said, "Well, I'll show you something." He took out a bankbook and pointed to the balance. It listed over $250,000 on deposit.

"You don't generally see an account like this for people who play cards," he said. "I decided very young that I'd make money, and save it. Most people who gamble win money at cards and they lose it shooting dice. Or they may win money at cards and they go out to a racetrack, or they think they're smart and can beat the stock market. I didn't make that mistake. I won money at cards and I kept it. I put it in good securities and stock."

Stevens was correct. Most gamblers live a peripatetic life, frittering away their resources. Even S.W. Erdnase confessed that he wrote *The Expert At The Card Table* because he needed the money.

Vernon countered, "Well, you don't generally see people who have it, show things like that either."

Stevens replied, "I'm kind of proud of it. I beat the racket. I've got that money in the bank, and I've got a home in Evanston worth that much money too. I have quite a little nest egg for my old age."

Vernon said, "Well, I understand you play poker here and you always win."

"Well," he said, "That's my fun. I like to keep my hand in. I don't go around gambling any more. I used to. I was known as the Mysterious Kid when I was young, and the reason for it was that I'd always go in and I'd win money and nobody ever knew that I was in on a crooked card move. I was just termed the Mysterious Kid because for some reason, I always won. They couldn't figure it out."

"Well," Vernon said, "I'd love to see you do something."

Stevens took Vernon back to the table where he usually played cards. As soon as he touched the pack, Vernon noticed that Stevens was left-handed. And, when Stevens dealt the cards, Vernon knew he was in the presence of the master. Stevens removed three Jacks from the deck, placed them on top and then dealt the cards alternately to Vernon and himself. Stevens got the three Jacks. Vernon knew he was using only three Jacks and was dealing them to himself, so he asked if Stevens would repeat the trick. Stevens did it twice more. Vernon, in awe, exclaimed, "You must have to deal fourths to do that!" Stevens replied, "You're pretty smart; you're right."

Stevens was the most accomplished card cheat of the twentieth century. He demonstrated not only a perfect understanding of technique and spent the thousands of

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hours to master it, but he also developed extremely sophisticated concepts and new techniques that extended the range of both card cheating and, through Vernon, magic. Stevens extended the technique in *The Expert At The Card Table* in ways no one, particularly Vernon, had ever imagined.

"To become adept at second dealing," S.W. Erdnase wrote, "is as difficult a task as can be given in card handling." Stevens could deal *thirds*—dealing the third card down from the top of the deck as if it were the first—flawlessly.

Erdnase also wrote that, "The blind process of riffling the two packets truly together ... leaving the order of the whole the same, is quite possible, but very difficult to perform perfectly."

Stevens had *multiple* ways of riffle shuffling the cards together on the table without altering the position of a single card. Stevens could also perform the shift, secretly transposing the halves of the pack after the initial cut, imperceptibly. His greatest innovation, however, was the riffle cull.

Stevens had Vernon shuffle the deck so that the cards were thoroughly mixed. He took the cards back and asked Vernon to name the value of a card; the nines were chosen. Stevens gave the deck a series of tabled shuffles, separating the deck into two halves and shuffling them together. The four nines were now on top of the pack.

Vernon said, "You must have been pretty lucky that time."

Stevens said, "No luck about it. I'll do it again. What cards would you like this time?"

Vernon said, "The fours." Stevens gave the deck a series of shuffles and cuts and then dealt the four fours from the top of the deck. Vernon was nonplussed. It simply wasn't possible. Stevens then repeated the demonstration several times.

The cheat who can deal seconds and bottoms, even thirds, still has to track and obtain the cards he wants for the deal. He first has to find the cards for the hand *and then* control them or transfer them to the desired location for dealing. S.W. Erdnase's own system, one whereby the cheat notes the position of cards in previously dealt hands and then assembles or culls the cards during the course of a shuffle so that they fall to a particular player or to the dealer during the course of play, had to be performed with an overhand shuffle. Sophisticated players, however, customarily shuffled the cards on the table. Stevens had invented a method whereby he could secretly spot, mark and redistribute to the top of the deck cards that formed a winning hand, *all while performing a series of riffle shuffles*. Vernon imagined that the only way someone could be that accomplished was to be locked up in Alcatraz or sent to Siberia for twenty years with nothing more than a pack of cards and his wits.

"I never thought I'd see the day when I'd see a man do something like that," Vernon said.

"Well, you won't see anyone else in the world do it. Eighteen years when I was a young boy I practiced this. Eighteen years before I went into action," Stevens replied.

Armed with his impossible technique, Stevens then made his fortune. At seventy-four, he attended the Waiters' Club just to keep his hand in the game.

"Sometimes," he said, "I give them their money back, if they're married men and they need it. Now some of these fellows are so avaricious, I love to beat them. They're so smart, they'd steal your right eye, but they can't beat me, I beat them."

It was hard for Vernon to imagine anything more beautiful than the Stevens' Riffle Cull. And yet, while Stevens appreciated Vernon's enthusiasm for his work, he added that if Vernon wanted to see the most beautiful thing ever done with cards, he should seek out a player named Ping Pong.

Ping Pong, Stevens informed him, had mastered the shift. "The shift," wrote Erdnase, "has yet to be invented that can be executed by a movement appearing as coincident card table routine." If Stevens was awed by Ping Pong's shift, Vernon thought, it must be a sleight to behold. Unfortunately, Stevens could offer no other information about the mysterious gambler. The move, Stevens said, was impossible to describe. The two men parted ways, but not before Stevens invited Vernon to visit him at his home in Evanston.

Vernon's encounter with Dad Stevens is a pivotal moment in the evolution of magic. Stevens and Vernon connected, not because Vernon had anything to offer Stevens, but because Stevens recognized in Vernon a kindred spirit, someone who had a deep understanding of the intellectual underpinnings of the profession and the tenacity to reach for them. If Vernon offered Stevens anything, it was being the repository for his life's work. Stevens, age seventy-four, must have recognized that Vernon, age twenty-five, was a worthy recipient. It is likely that Stevens' name and innovations would have gone unrecorded without Vernon. Vernon was like Sir Richard Burton discovering the Kamasutra. Ultimately, he was rewarded for seeking out the uncharted vistas and cultural remnants of an exotic culture. Unlike Burton, however, Vernon only shared Stevens' Riffle Cull with a few close confidants. He guarded the secret closely for over sixty-five years. Today it remains the most difficult technique in the realm of card table artifice.

Several days after his session with Stevens, his head still in the clouds, Vernon visited Hunt's, a gambling supply house in Chicago that specialized in selling marked cards

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and loaded dice. First, he asked whether anyone had ever heard of a man named Stevens. An older gentlemen behind the counter said, "You don't mean Dad Stevens? The Mysterious Kid?" Vernon said, "Yeah," and the gentleman replied, "I've never met him, but he had a tremendous reputation here." Vernon then asked about Ping Pong. According to the staff at Hunt's, Ping Pong had last been seen around French Lick Springs, a health spa and gambling resort in Indiana. Immediately, Vernon set out to find him.

He arrived in the town and checked into the French Lick Springs Hotel, a grand building where industrialists and entrepreneurs could ride in their own railroad cars up to the door. The room cost Vernon the sizable sum of eighteen dollars per day. It was, however, on the European plan: three meals a day and all the mineral water, hot and cold, that one could stomach. Even better, the hotel had its own gambling den. There, Vernon made further inquires but learned very little. Although several gamblers there had met Ping Pong—a little red-nosed fellow who drank a great deal—they knew neither his real name nor his nationality. They did confirm, however, that he was perhaps the only man who ever lived who could perform the shift at the table. He had an unorthodox method but one that was highly effective. At the end of the week, Vernon heard that Ping Pong preferred to play in West Baden, another health retreat and center of gambling, named after Baden Baden in Germany and located just six miles from French Lick Springs. Vernon departed immediately, but he was too late. Ping Pong had come and gone. The trail was cold. It was time to return to Chicago, seek out more information, and perhaps meet with Dad Stevens again.

Once back in the Windy City, Vernon checked in at his regular haunts, the gambling supply houses, and asked if they had any further information of interest. Before he knew it, he had been arrested.

The day had started innocently enough. Vernon met two small-time gamblers in a store and joined them for lunch at a nearby diner. After a few moments, two plainclothes policemen interrupted the trio's conversation and invited the sharps to police headquarters. They were wanted for questioning.

Vernon was outraged by the demands, demeanor, and language of the police officers and protested vehemently in his best Canadian accent. They had no right, he told them, to force the gentlemen to the station. Then and there, the policemen decided that Vernon ought to come along too. They grabbed him and escorted him to the station with the others. After some routine questioning, the gamblers were turned loose. Vernon, however, was detained. He had no identification and his only possessions were a dollar thirty-nine in change, several fresh decks of cards and a small sharp pair of scissors. The police decided that they had made an unexpected haul and that Vernon was, in fact, "The Black Prince," a notorious international pickpocket. The police howled when Vernon told them that he used the scissors to cut silhouettes.

Vernon was permitted to make one phone call. He phoned Harlan England, known to his friends as Bud. Vernon had only met England a couple of weeks earlier. Vernon had been practicing some tricky sleight with a deck of cards to pass the dull dinner hour in front of his hotel lobby silhouette stand when he became conscious of someone peering over his shoulder. Turning around, he looked up into a pair of smiling blue eyes and heard a drawling Texas voice say, "You're pretty good kid, what else do ya' do?" A long conversation ensued. Vernon later said:

Bud was a wiry little ex-cow puncher from Texas and consumed large quantities of Old Overholt, which seemed to have no effect upon him whatever, except to loosen his tongue and unlock the storage of his strange adventures in far corners of the world. Bud had run away from home at an early age and joined the army. He rejoined during the First World War and after being discharged became a grifter. He had a disability allowance from the government and was thereby provided with shelter and food without having to resort to a nine to five existence to secure them. He managed to earn a good living by playing cards and selling or pitching novelties at fairs or on street corners.

The two discussed the merits of false cuts, bottom and second deals, and other sleights with a deck of cards devised primarily for the use of cardsharping. Now, with

Cutting silhouettes

his one phone call from the police station, Vernon implored England to bail him out. England raced to the station. He later recalled:

He knew and hated every cop in Chicago because they treated the notorious gangsters with great deference and handled them with kid gloves, taking it out on poor little fall guys, picked up for peddling without a license, or on a bawdy Saturday night reveler, all the sadistic and frustrated viciousness of their natures. Upon his arrival old Bud cursed them out in superlative style and demanded that one of them accompany him immediately to the hotel to check on [Vernon's] story that he was a magician and silhouette artist.

Vernon was released. England then asked how he was holding up. When he discovered that Vernon had only one dollar and thirty-nine cents in his pocket, he pulled out his wallet, crammed to capacity with one hundred and five hundred dollar bills, and counted out three thousand dollars. He insisted that Vernon take the money as a gift. When Vernon refused, he insisted. "Do me a favor and carry it around for a couple of days, it'll make you feel better. And in the meantime, if you change your mind and decide to spend part of it or all of it, it's okay by me." England had the improvident habit of giving away hundreds, and more often thousands, of dollars to some of his buddies who were in a continual state of insolvency. Vernon spent about twenty dollars for rent and laundry, and less than a week later returned the balance to his benefactor who, by that time, was flat broke.

Vernon had had enough of Chicago. It was time to return home to New York, but how? Another new acquaintance instructed him on the relatively new art of hitchhiking: Wait at a filling station where motorists stop for a cup of coffee or visit the washroom. Strike up a conversation, make sure the person understands that he is not speaking to a derelict or criminal, and then ask how far he is traveling. Vernon decided to give it a try, and it worked. He was on his way.

Back in New York, he headed straight for Coney Island, where he discovered that Sam Margules was managing a magic show. Whatever worries Vernon carried with him from Chicago melted away; Sam would help. When Vernon walked into the dressing room to see Margules, he asked a tall, nice-looking, fair-headed fellow named Eddy Ackerman whether Sam Margules was available.

"No," Ackerman responded and then added, "Who will I tell him called?"

Vernon replied, "Vernon, Dai Vernon."

Ackerman, as if defeated, sullenly said, "Oh," and then went on the stage where he began packing his props into a bag. Vernon realized that this was the magician who worked the show.

"I suppose you wonder why I'm getting ready to leave?" Ackerman continued. "Sam told me I could have this job as long as one fellow didn't come to town. 'If Vernon ever comes in, you're fired automatically, because he's going to work here.' Sam says what he means, so I'm through."

Vernon said, "Don't be silly, I wouldn't take a person's job."

Just then, Margules returned to the theatre. He greeted Vernon with open arms and suggested he get ready for the next show.

Vernon said, "Sam, I just came in from Chicago. I hitchhiked. I need a shower."

Vernon never told Sam that he would work for him; Sam took it for granted. Ackerman was not a professional magician. He was a haberdasher by trade and fond of magic. Sam had given him the opportunity to break in new material and to learn how to perform. In Sam's mind, that opportunity had now drawn to a close.

Sam told Vernon, "Get in there, do the Cards Up The Sleeve. Here Eddy, lend him that Die Box. You know how to work the Die Box."

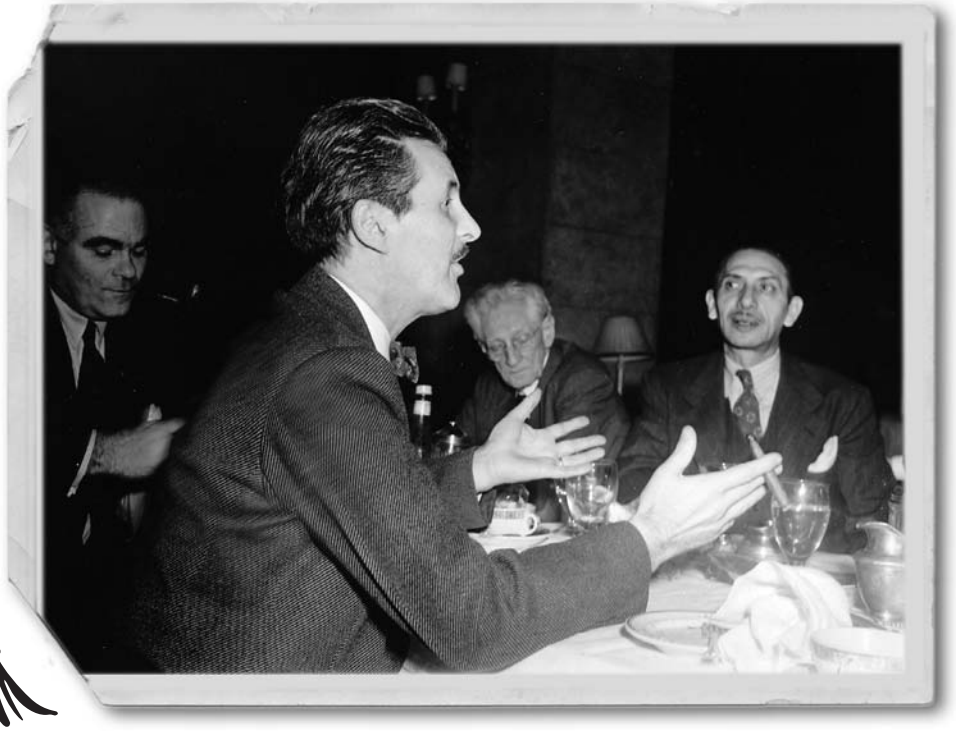
Vernon protested, "They're liable to throw things."

Sam was persistent. "All right, you dodge them. What do you care; you flop, so what? What are they going to do, kill you?"

Vernon acquiesced to Sam's pressure. He walked out and performed the Cards Up The Sleeve, the Miser's Dream, and a few other tricks.

After the show, Sam said, "You are going to work here and you're going to sell a package of magic. You know how much money you can make selling a package of magic?" Before he could respond, Sam told Vernon that Harry Usher and his wife, Frances, who performed a mind reading act at another location on the Island, banked $400-$600 per week. Vernon balked and reminded Sam that the Ushers sold "astrological charts," not magic.

Sam said, "Shut up. You're going to make a lot of money. I know a nice new apartment; I'll get you a nice, clean room. I'm going to introduce you to a fellow named



From left, Sam Margules, Vernon, Al Baker, and Sam Horowitz

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Raoul. We are going to make up a package of magic to sell. Don't pick out good tricks. Give them the Japanese handcuff, a keyhole puzzle and tell the fellows 'what they see through the keyhole is nobody's business.' There will be nothing in there, just the card, but that makes people curious and they'll want to buy. Sell them the flip-flop card and the Diminishing Card that folds up. Make up a package that may cost you three cents, perhaps less, and sell it for a quarter. That's good profit."

Vernon bought several boxes of envelopes and packed them with the tricks that Raoul provided. After each performance, he would demonstrate a trick or two and say, "Now anybody who wants any of these tricks I performed, come up and help yourself."

Sales were disappointing. Then Harry Usher came in and introduced himself to Vernon.

"I watched your entertainment in here. My name's Harry Usher. You are going to make a lot of money if you stay in this field for the summer, more than you ever made in your life. You have sincerity. If you're a phony, even this Coney Island crowd will pick you out like that. But if you're sincere, people have faith in you and you can tell them anything."

He then advised Vernon to discard the envelopes.

"You're not selling them, throw those envelopes away. People are suspicious; they don't think they are getting all the merchandise. Coney Island is the flimflam place, everything's fake. They probably figure they are only getting a sheet of instructions. If you want to use the envelope don't fold the card, leave it standing up. Put the Chinese handcuff in this way. When you hold it up it looks like a Christmas tree. Make up the package so you see every piece of merchandise, put a rubber band around it to hold it in place. Do each trick and put it in the envelope. 'Now, who wants the one I was I using?'

"Now," he said, "they know that they've seen you use this and they know it's authentic; that you are not demonstrating one thing and selling them another. This has a ring of truth. Your sales will jump up one hundred, two hundred, five hundred percent."

Vernon followed Usher's advice. It worked like magic. He couldn't make change fast enough. Sam would come as soon as the show was over and count the change. He would advance Vernon some money for daily expenses and then pocket the rest. He was doing this for Vernon's own good. Sam knew that if he handed Vernon all of the money, it would be gone as fast as it had appeared. Vernon loved to gamble and socialize, and would eventually fritter the money away. Sam banked the money and handed it over to Vernon at the end of the season. The total was over $700.

Sam Margules

Although Vernon had only been away from New York for a year [he returned in 1919], the city had experienced enormous growth and the pains that accompany it. In January 1919, Alfred E. Smith, a poor boy from the Lower East Side and a hero of the labor reform movement was sworn in as the first Irish American governor in America. The city was bursting with people as more than three million converged on Manhattan to take part in the delirious victory celebration as veterans returned to American soil and, in particular, to New York. On August 26, 1919, American women finally won the right to vote. Labor movements sprung up, and in early December 250 outspoken activists, including famed anarchist Emma Goldman, were transported to Ellis Island on grounds of treason and deported to Russia. Dr. James William Elliott, the Undisputed Challenge Card Champion of the World, was a sympathizer. New York displaced London as the investment capital of the world. With Vaudeville in full swing and its central booking office located in Manhattan, performers flocked to the city to impress the agents and operators. Some, like the Australian John Gerard Rodney Boyce, landed at Coney Island. Boyce changed his name to Jean Hugard and leased a small theatre in Luna Park to present his show "A Night in Pekin." Another change, one that would have a profound impact on the creation and performance of magic, was the continuing rise in power of the amateur magician. Amateur magicians had always aspired to duplicate the magic effects performed by their professional brethren. Now, however, the roles began to reverse.

At a meeting of the National Conjurors' Association held on November 6, 1918 at Martinka & Co., now under the management of Otto Waldmann, Jean Hugard was baffled by a series of extraordinary card tricks performed by a little-known amateur magician, Henry Gavin. Hugard was so dumbfounded that he took 1500 words to describe the experience in the January 1919 issue of *The Sphinx*. Hugard concluded his article by saying,

Mr. Gavin has since shown me many more of his card miracles, but the foregoing will justify me in saying that his work is the cleverest and most finished that has come under my observation. Mr. Gavin is at present interested in the art purely as an amateur. Should he decide to devote himself to it as a professional I have no doubt he will win his way to the topmost rungs of the ladder of conjuring fame.

Henry Gavin was born Arthur Gavin Finley in October 1887, the son of William and Margaret Finley. William was a saloonkeeper and Margaret ran the boarding house where they resided on East 34th Street. Finley began marketing magic effects via mail order through advertisements in *The Sphinx* in 1908 and joined the local clubs under the name Henry Gavin, his mother's maiden name and his middle name. Peter Ten Eyck, an oil company executive who occasionally took lessons from Vernon, suggested the two should meet. Vernon knocked on the door of Finley's Madison Avenue studio and, with a considerable amount of prodding, finally gained entrance. Finley was quite standoffish. Vernon was persistent, and eventually Finley showed Vernon a "think-of-a-card" effect that fooled him. Finley had no aspirations to become a professional magician. He was a commercial artist by trade, a talented man who had spent his early twenties in Paris, studying the latest trends. Vernon told Finley that he still wanted to become a professional portrait artist, but Finley did his best to discourage him. Finley's suggestion echoed the advice Vernon had received from Charles Gibson several years earlier.

In January 1920, Dr. Elliott died of pulmonary complications. The magic world needed to anoint a new "King of Cards." Houdini, as was always the case, claimed to be the king even while Elliott was alive, a boast not taken seriously by anyone other than the escape master himself and his sycophants. Houdini even used his power and influence to commandeer the publication of *Elliott's Last Legacy* from Clinton Burgess, a prominent society entertainer for the New York 400 and a prolific contributor and scribe for magic magazines who was given the task by Elliott's kin of translating the Doctor's personal notebooks (full of methods and ideas for tricks) into prose. Houdini was the last person Elliott would have wanted to be the editor of his life's work. In Vernon's opinion, published in the "Magic and Magicians" column in *Billboard Magazine*, the new king of cards could only be one person—Arthur Finley.

It has been my good fortune to view at close range the work of all the leading professionals with a pack of cards, also many exceedingly clever gamblers who are extremely difficult to approach, as their knowledge is their livelihood, and they are very reticent about "tipping their mit" [sic], to use their own vernacular. Some of these fellows have certain sleights and moves entirely unknown to the magic fraternity, and they are among the cleverest and most subtle manipulations ever invented.

Only a few of the professional magicians have any knowledge whatsoever of these finer moves in card handling and that knowledge does not run beyond a few elementary "stocks," "dealing seconds" and some extremely apparent and little used "false shuffles"; if they had this knowledge they would not be willing to devote the hours and hours of incessant practice necessitated for their complete mastery—moves that must pass as natural under the closest scrutiny, and without the employment of misdirection.

The late Dr. Elliott was thoroly [sic] versed in the secrets of the professional gambler, and by their judicious use was able to nonplus and completely bewilder the even well-schooled magicians of his time. Furthermore, he realized the vital importance of making all sleights and move under cover of perfectly natural movements. He had absolutely no use for any fanciful or exaggerated gestures of any kind. "Be Natural," was his favorite slogan.

No one but Dr. Elliott's closest friends can conceive the years of practice he put in on single trifling little moves to bring them to perfection.

All the time he was practicing another was doing likewise. His name is Arthur Finley, and today I haven't a doubt but he is the rightful successor to Dr. Elliott.

He is a well-known New York artist and cards with him are merely a hobby yet he far excels all others in this most difficult branch of the art.

To see him make the "two-handed shift," execute the "side slip" or "false shuffle" would be a revelation to many. His work is as near perfection as anything I have ever seen, and this perfection was attained by persistent and painstaking practice—years of it.

Besides a complete mastery of all the standard sleights he has hundreds of entirely original problems of his own which rank with the best of them.

Magicians should by all means make his acquaintance.

(Signed) Dai W. Vernen,
"Sleightly Known."

Outside Clyde Powers' Magic Shop in New York

From left, (standing) Cardini, Jack Daley; (seated) Arthur Finley, Sam Horowitz, Al Baker, Charlie Miller, and Vernon

Although Finley married Mary Carlile Lewis, a woman who would rise through the ranks of the New York fashion world to eventually become a role model for many American women, Finley's real soul mate was, in many respects, Vernon. Finley was seven years older but just as committed to sleight-of-hand, particularly with cards. And Finley's temperament was a perfect match for Vernon's. They met frequently and ventured forth to magic emporiums and societies of secrets, of which there were several in Manhattan. With his Coney Island funds rapidly depleting, however, Vernon had to find some new means to support his habits. Teaching the odd executive with an eccentric interest in card tricks was not enough.

Perhaps it was time for Vernon to also venture farther afield. He decided to visit other towns and cities. He would cut silhouettes at fairs and festivals and, where possible, convince department stores to engage his services as the resident silhouette artist. He would stay as long as the traffic was there.

A deck of cards was rarely out of his hand, and even while waiting for business at the silhouette-cutting stand, it was not uncommon for another amateur magician to discover his presence. Local chapters of the Society of American Magicians, known as Assemblies, had sprouted up across America. Assembly presidents would often invite Vernon to their meetings. They were interested in learning about the players and personalities in the New York magic scene, and Vernon was rarely at a loss for words.

In Cincinnati, for example, George W. Stock, the president of The Cincinnati Magician's Club, spied Vernon cutting silhouettes at Pogues Department store and invited him to attend the local club meeting. There Vernon met Stewart Judah and John Braun, two dedicated amateurs, and continued conversing with them well after the meeting had adjourned. Braun eventually had to depart, sensing that he owed some responsibility to his employer to arrive the next morning at work on time. Judah and Vernon, however, continued their conversation beneath a street lamp into the wee hours. They stood on a downtown street corner, demonstrating card tricks for the police officer on the beat, the only audience available after midnight. The two eventually retired, but they vowed to continue their conversation over dinner before Vernon left Cincinnati. Braun attended the dinner.

I'll never forget the impression Dai made on me. I was seeing magic for the first time—it was a different kind of magic than I had seen in theatres, Chautauqua, or vaudeville, except Nate Leipzig's unfathomable magic, which looked different in his hands from the book descriptions.

Both Stewart and I had a copy of Erdnase*, and Vernon could say, "You name what you want to see and I'll do it for you," and as far as we could tell, he was doing it. I drank in everything that evening, and had to go home on a "night owl" streetcar (after mid-night they ran "night owls" every hour) and I was woozy next morning, but not so woozy that I couldn't recall and jot down a sizable pad of notes on what I had seen (the night) before.*

Judah and Braun were not the only magicians dumbfounded by Vernon's magic. Harry Houdini would soon be added to the list.

Vernon found himself in Chicago on the hunt for a man who could deal from the center of the deck: that is, someone who could take a card from the middle while making it appear as though it had been dealt from the top. John

Sprong, having heard of the man who could perform such a feat, had written to Vernon and offered him one hundred dollars if he could provide any information about the gambler and his technique. Vernon knew the idea was nonsensical but, if true, and coupled with the Stevens' Riffle Cull, it would be the ultimate weapon in the arsenal of advantage play. The cheat could cull the desired cards to the top with the Riffle Cull and then *not have to* circumvent the cut, the *bête noir* —as Erdnase termed it—of the gambler's existence. The pass or shift would become obsolete.

Vernon found no trace of either the gambler or the technique. Most likely it was an urban myth.

On February 6, 1922, Vernon and Sam Margules, who was also visiting Chicago, attended a banquet in honor of Harry Houdini. The two joined sixty other magicians, members of the Chicago Assembly of the Society of American Magicians, in dress suits and dinner jackets, in the Crystal Room, a mirrored ballroom in the Great Northern Hotel. They were all there to bask in the light

generated by the self-proclaimed greatest entertainer in the world. Houdini was at the peak of his powers, having built an enviable career escaping from restraints of every shape and form. Although he was a vigorous forty-eight years old, the pace he set for himself had been exacting. Being tossed off of a bridge wrapped in a web of iron was difficult and dangerous. His bones ached. He had experienced so much success that the *need* to get out there and perform again and again had become diluted. The public was interested only in each subsequent stunt being more sensational then the last. Although he was performing at the Majestic Theatre, exposing Spirit Mediums—people who proclaimed to be able to contact the dead both verbally and physically, all of whom Houdini regarded as fraudulent—he was also in the midst of re-engineering his career.

Houdini recognized that the future of entertainment lay in another medium—cinema—and he had come to Chicago to promote *The Man from Beyond*, a silent film produced by the Houdini Motion Picture Corporation in which he played the forerunner of the modern day action hero who, after having been frozen in a glacier for 100 years, emerged to rescue the beautiful heroine from the brink of Niagara Falls. The film would not be a success. Houdini was a sensation on the stage, not the screen. Audiences seemed to know intuitively—even then—that trick photography and cinematic hanky panky should receive credit along with the star on screen.

Houdini strode into the reception like a political figure on the campaign trail. Bess, his wife, followed in his wake. The sound of applause and flashbulbs popping ushered them into the room. Magic in the 1920s had its public and private stars. Houdini was the former, and the roomful of magicians, mostly well-heeled amateurs, profited from the association. Dr. A.M. Wilson, the editor and publisher of *The Sphinx*, greeted Houdini at the door.

Margules came to the dinner not only because it was *the* magical event in Chicago but also because he worshipped Houdini, having seen him in New York many times, both onstage and off. Houdini had even given Sam one of his tailcoats, the formal attire he wore on stage. Sam wore the coat in his own shows with great pride, despite the fact that the fabric was tattered and the garment was ridiculously ill-fitting. Houdini was short and Sam was a bear of a man.

The celebration started at 11:00 p.m. and the magicians took their places at the tables as soon as the honored guests arrived. Two long banquet tables bracketed the head table where Houdini sat with Dr. Wilson. Sam Margules and Vernon sat near one another, far from the focus of attention. After the perfunctory speeches and a grand dinner, various magic personalities performed for Houdini. At 3:30 a.m., Houdini agreed to close the show by performing his stock display of flourishes with a pack of cards. The February 1922 issue of *The Sphinx* carried this testimonial:

And then, to fittingly close an event which we will ever treasure in our memories, Houdini displayed the impossible with a pack of cards; it was a revelation to many of us to think that this man, who has made his reputation in a distinct branch of our art, can emulate practically every sleight used by the greatest card specialists; passes (and) revolutions that you never thought of—ribbons—waterfalls, and many original effects which it would take years to duplicate.

After the performers had retired from the stage, the formality dissipated and the magicians that remained performed their favorite pocket tricks for each other, gossiping about the latest wonders and wizards.

Margules went straight for Houdini. He dragged Vernon along with unbridled enthusiasm. Margules, although not a sophisticated man, recognized talent when he saw it, and he saw in Vernon the most gifted card handler ever. Naively, Margules thought that Houdini would be interested in meeting him.

Houdini glanced at Vernon, sizing the newcomer up. 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 a 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, then thumbed through a few cards and removed one from the spread. It was the Ace of Clubs.

Vernon removed a pen from his pocket and handed it to Houdini. "Please sign the card."

"Do what?" Houdini asked.

"Sign the card. Write your name on the face."

Houdini was perplexed. If required, the custom was to tear off the corner of the card and leave it with the participant as a testament of its singular nature. No one asked that a card be signed in ink. Vernon had experimented with inks, however, and had purchased a new pen, one with a chamber that contained indelible ink, ink that would not run or smear on the stiff paper of a playing card. Houdini, intrigued, scrawled "H.H." on the pasteboard. Vernon took back the pen, replaced its cap, and returned it to his pocket. He then motioned for Houdini to hand over the card.

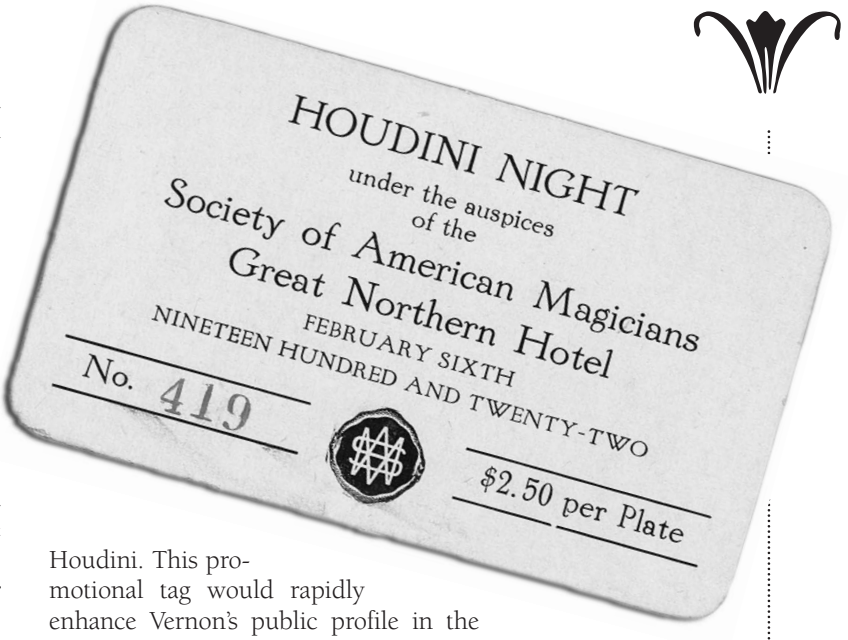
Vernon placed it face up on the deck. He blew softly on the ink to ensure that it had dried and then, slowly and deliberately, turned the card face down. Without ceremony, Vernon lifted the signed card from the top of the deck, pushed the second card slightly over the right side of the pack and then inserted the signed card beneath it. He then squared up the cards so that the entire deck was in perfect alignment. Vernon gave the deck a purported magical squeeze and then turned over the top card. It was Houdini's signed Ace of Clubs. The trick was the tonic that aroused Houdini's attention. He asked Vernon to repeat it.

Vernon did the trick a second time. He held the card at his right fingertips and then, just as he was about to insert it below the top card, he paused and tilted the face of the card towards Houdini so that he could see that it was indeed his card. Vernon pushed it home beneath the top card and squared up the deck. Giving the deck a gentle squeeze, he created a soft sound effect by riffling his right thumb up along the end the deck. Vernon slowly turned the top card face up. Once again, H.H. had risen to the top.

Houdini interjected, "Oh, I've got it. You have two Aces of Clubs."

This was not the first time Sam had heard such a remark. He had seen Vernon perform this feat on other occasions. Sam reminded Harry that he had initialed the card. In addition to being the self-crowned *King of Cards*, Houdini often boasted that he could not be fooled if he had the opportunity to see a trick performed three times. Sam now understood the challenge.

There was a titter of excitement in the air as Vernon removed the H.H. card from the pack and inserted it beneath the top card once again. Sam knew that if Harry could not figure out how the trick was performed this time, Vernon would make his reputation as the man who fooled Houdini. This promotional tag would rapidly enhance Vernon's public profile in the way that Howard Thurston, the most famous illusionist in America, had kick-started his own career by fooling Herrmann.

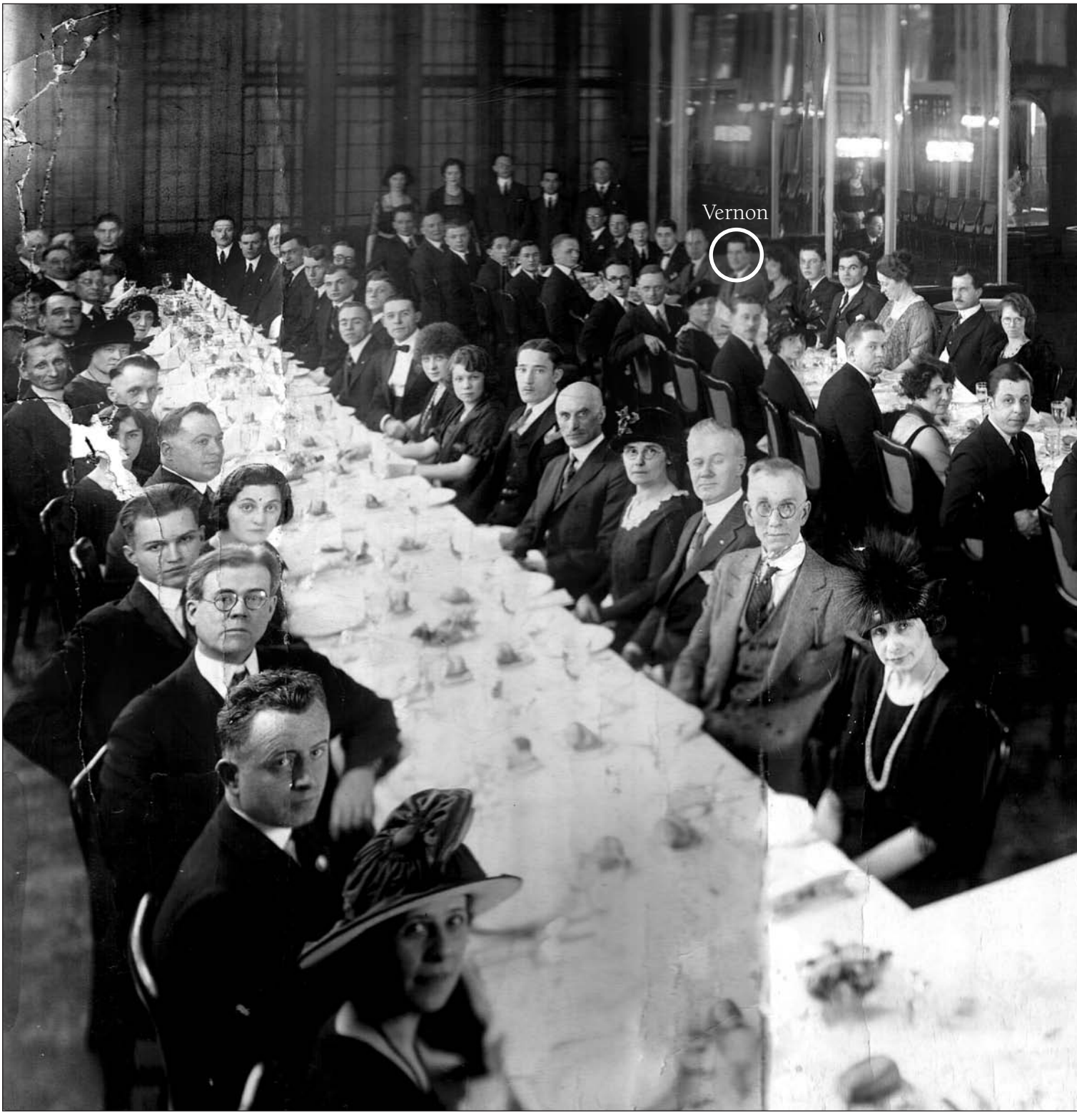


Vernon, however, was not interested in the personal accolades or promotional possibilities. He had learned at an early age that there was no correlation between public profile and personal ability when, at age seven, he mystified Howard Thurston with a card trick drawn from Thurston's own book of magical secrets. Houdini, though, was far more aware of the stakes at hand. He came to Chicago to promote his career only to now find himself being fooled repeatedly and badly by an unknown magician with, as the press would likely describe it, a simple card trick. His mind raced, grasping at explanations. He had certainly seen and performed an astronomical number of card tricks, and while rank and file amateur magicians disdain card tricks, Houdini knew he was witnessing something much more sophisticated than it appeared. "Again," he said.

For the third time Vernon inserted Houdini's selection beneath the top card and made it reappear on top. "Well, Harry?" Sam asked. Houdini wasn't about to admit defeat. He called Bess to his side. "Bess, watch this. He has a clever card trick." Like the wives of most magicians, Bess had no great desire to see a card trick, but she knew her role and played it for Harry's benefit. That benefit, of course, was the opportunity for Houdini to see the trick a fourth time. Bess nodded to Sam and then turned towards Vernon.

Vernon showed Bess the card bearing her husband's initials, initials she knew very well. She watched politely as Vernon inserted the card beneath the top one, made a magical gesture and then turned over the top card. She gave an honest expression of surprise when the card appeared on top. She turned to Harry with a little grin, the grin a child makes when the magician pulls a coin out of her ear.

Houdini's silhouette cut by Vernon



"Come on, Harry," said Sam. "Admit it. You are fooled."

Houdini stood silently—thinking. Bess asked Vernon whether he could do the trick again, but Vernon sensed that it was time to stop. The most powerful weapon in the magician's repertoire is surprise. "Never do the same trick twice," was the phrase coined specifically to prevent informed observers like Houdini from reconstructing secrets. Doing the same trick five times in a row was a challenge, plain and simple. Repeating the trick also went against a philosophy espoused by S.W. Erdnase in *The Expert At The Card Table*: "Excessive vanity proves the undoing of many experts. The temptation to show off is great. He has become a past master in his profession. One single display of dexterity and his usefulness is past in that particular company, and the repu-

tation is liable to precede him in many another."

Vernon was not interested in showing off. He repeated the trick one last time—but for Bess only. Once again, the card appeared on top of the deck. The lines on her face, the result of the wear and tear of touring and watching her husband endure physical pain, vanished from her brow and reappeared on Houdini's.

She turned to her husband, not understanding the significance of the challenge, and inadvertently added insult to injury. "Harry, can you do that one?" Houdini ignored the question.

"Again," Houdini commanded. Vernon's muttering that five times was probably sufficient was overruled by Sam. "Admit it, Harry, he's got you." Suddenly, Bess and Vernon

The Trick that Fooled Houdini

By Richard Kaufman

WHEN DAI VERNON FOOLED HOUDINI in 1922 by repeatedly making his signed card rise from the second position to the top, he was using a tool that almost no magician would have expected: the double-backed card. In 1922, the only person who had exploited Hofzinser's invention of the double-backed card (70 years earlier) was Theodore DeLand. He had used the gimmicked card in two marketed effects: "The Two Card Monte" and "Inverto." The monte trick was sold as a gag and the magician was instructed to reveal the double-backed card at the end as part of the joke. "Inverto" was a full-deck routine where half the cards in the deck were turned face up, yet all the cards could instantly be shown face down a second later—it used 26 double-backed cards. The use of the double-backed card in the latter was anything but subtle, however since no one had seen a double-backed card used secretly in a deck it fooled everyone. But, the first person to use a single double-backed card in the deck in a subtle way, as a secret aid, was (as far as we know) Dai Vernon. Poor old Harry really didn't stand a chance, particularly since Vernon was using a handling of the Double Lift that was far beyond anything either published or in common use at the time.

The Professor explained his method right here in his column "The Vernon Touch" in April, 1973:

The tag line "He fooled Houdini" came about from my having fooled him in Chicago back in 1919. I fooled him six or eight times with a version of the Ambitious Card. I had him initial one card on the face and then turned it face down and very slowly placed it under the top card ... making it now the second card down. And then I very slowly turned over the top card and it was his initialed card, back on top. I did this over and over and I remember Houdini kept saying, "You must be using two cards," but I kept pointing out the fact that he initialed the card and I would have had no way of duplicating it on a similar card. Sam Margules was there at the time and he said, "Harry, admit it—you're fooled!" Well, Harry would never admit that anyone could fool him, but I have a letter from Bess Houdini in which she stated that he had been fooled. And, in case you are interested, in doing the Ambitious Card for Houdini I simply used a double-backed card on top of the deck. After the chosen card had been selected and initialed it was placed face up on the deck. A Double Lift and turn over left his card second from the top. I then slowly placed the top card second from the top (this is the double-backed card, remember), which placed his card now on top. After turning his card face up, the above moves were repeated with the same results. For a variation it was shown singly and placed in second position. Then a Double Turnover left it again on top. If you'll try this you will see how deceptive it can be. I remember so well how Harry kept asking me to "do it again."

connected. Bess realized that her husband was in danger; not physical danger, but the danger of losing his pride. Bess knew that pride was the real secret to Houdini's success. When inscribing promotional photographs, Houdini often wrote that his brain was the key that set him free. Bess saw the same look of determination on his face that appeared every time he was challenged to escape from a new set of handcuffs. His determination, the unwillingness to admit defeat at any cost, was what motivated him.

Vernon was not interested in humiliating Houdini in front of his peers, the group of magicians that had gathered around to watch him perform. They couldn't comprehend the gravity of the situation, anyway. Vernon also realized that the constant repetition had raised his own stakes. What if Houdini figured out how the trick was performed? What then?

"This is it," said Vernon. "This is the last time." Vernon knew that the slightest tremor in his hands would betray his position. For the final time, Vernon inserted the card beneath the top one. He riffled the end of the deck with his right thumb as before. Slowly and deliberately he turned over the top card—his trump card. H.H. was back on top. Houdini looked at Sam, at Bess, and then at Vernon.

It was late and time to go. Houdini strode out of the banquet hall, Bess close behind him.

Margules and Vernon parted ways. Margules returned to New York and Vernon, with no ambition to jump to the professional ranks by marketing himself as "The Man Who Fooled Houdini," continued his peregrinations, searching for gamblers with arcane knowledge, sleights and subterfuges. As was becoming his custom, financial support came from cutting silhouettes.

Vernon met his next crew of hustlers en route from Louisville to Lexington, Kentucky.

I'm not a horseplayer. I may have a lot of vices, but playing the horses isn't one of them, although I love races and I enjoy going to the track occasionally to make a few bets. Well, one of the few times that I really bet a little money was at a track in Louisville, Kentucky. I played a parlay, and in those days I didn't know much about parlays except that you bet three horses, and if they all won, you came up with quite a bankroll. Well, luckily, two of the horses I bet on were long shots, and I collected about $1,700.00 for about a $30.00 bet. I was a pretty happy individual, and when I went up to cash my ticket, everybody was standing there applauding.

Well, some guys there must have spotted what they thought was a young sucker. I had quite a bankroll, because they doled it out in tens and twenties and it looked like a cabbage. Anyway, I stayed around Louisville for a couple of days at the Tyler Hotel and from there I was going to Lexington where I was going to cut some silhouettes. When I got on the train, the train had no sooner pulled out when a rather nice looking young fellow came over to me and said, "Say, do you play bridge?" And I said, "Well, I play, but not well." So he asked, "Would you like to join us? We need a fourth for a game "I didn't suspect anything at the time, because he looked like a college kid or something. They had a parlor car, so I went back there and they had a little table set up there, and I noticed that the two guys sitting there weren't like this other kid at all. One of them looked like an old sharper, and the other was a real grifter-type.

VERNON WAS NOT INTERESTED IN SHOWING OFF. He repeated the trick one last time—but for Bess only. Once again, the card appeared on top of the deck. The lines on her face, the result of the wear and tear of touring and watching her husband endure physical pain, vanished from her brow and reappeared on Houdini's.

Well, I smelled a rat right away. So I sat down and we played bridge for a little while, and then the older guy said, "Listen, I don't understand this game. You fellows are too good at bidding. Let's play poker. We don't have much time on this train anyway." I figured that this was it, but they had no way in the world of knowing that I even knew one card from the other, so I put on an act and shuffled with the old "haymow" shuffle and occasionally dropped a card. Now this other guy was doing a pretty bad milk from the bottom and running up the cards, and he'd put them down to have this partner of his cut, and he'd put them back and say, "Cut them clean. I don't like cards messed like that," because obviously the guy had missed the crimp. I even saw him check the bottom card a few times to make sure. Well, the funny part is, I'd get a Jack in the hole, and a Jack face up, and I'd say, "Gee, it's hot in here. I've got to get a drink of water," and I'd turn my hand down and walk away. Well, it was getting tougher and tougher all the time not to get hooked into one of these hands, because I knew darn well if I didn't bet one of these good hands, they'd suspect something. So I managed to stall along until finally I got a chance to do a few things, and I really won a couple of nice pots because I double-crossed them.

Finally, this old guy turned to his partner and said, "Listen, I'm an old timer in this racket and you fellows should be smarter. This fellow knows more than he's supposed to know." Well, by this time I had over $70 of their money, and he said, "Come on, we're on a short bankroll. We only have about $125 between us, and we've got to get to Lexington and make some money. Will you please give us back our money?" Well, I looked at him and said, "Listen, if you'd won and I told you I needed the money, would I get it back?" Anyway, I thought about it for a while, and then I said, "What's your best game?" And he said, "Six card knock rummy." So we played a few hands at $25 a hand, and we seesawed back and forth, and I finally wound up with about $25 of their money.

While Vernon was out-hustling hustlers, the world of magic was undergoing its own transformation. The public was no longer interested in performers who merely manipulated playing cards; they wanted to see women sawn in half. Indeed, despite Nevil Maskelyne's misgivings when the English magician and magical inventor P.T. Selbit performed the illusion at a special performance at St. George's Hall, London in December 1920, Sawing In Half developed a stranglehold on the public imagination. It was one of the few illusions that could physically attract an audience into a theatre independent of the personality of the performer. It was also an illusion that could be both pirated economically and promoted on a grand scale.

Horace Goldin, a Polish Jew raised in a farmhouse just outside Vilna, Poland, who would eventually stage command performances before the crowned heads of Europe, developed his own method for performing the effect. He then licensed his version of the illusion to other magicians for use in their own shows. Goldin, who charged fifty dollars per week plus a percentage of box office receipts, vehemently attacked anyone else who performed the illusion, including the originator P.T. Selbit. Goldin obtained an injunction that prevented Selbit from performing his own trick on his 1921 American tour.

One license was sold to Sam Margules. Sam wanted to feature the illusion at a theatre he was setting up for Harry Schwartz, a friend with a few dollars to spare, on Coney Island. Sam knew how to sell blood and guts. The illusion drew capacity crowds and when the rain came and business was slow, Margules made arrangements with the Coney Island Hospital to drive an ambulance back and forth from the theatre. The ambulance would rush down Surf Avenue, bell clanging, and stop in front of the theater. Attendants would rush in with a stretcher and come out with some dismembered form tucked beneath the sheets. It was a sensational stunt and crowds flocked in.

There were a couple of subtle differences between Selbit and Goldin's illusions. Whereas Selbit could perform his version with one woman, Goldin required two. Eugenia Hayes, the future Mrs. Dai Vernon, became one of them.

Eugenia, known as Jeanne, was born in 1902. A pretty, petite blonde, she was traumatized at age twelve by her parents' divorce, which placed her in the middle of a vicious and vindictive custody battle. When her father and mother finally separated, she went to live with her mother in Sheepshead Bay, a community near Coney Island. Her mother died shortly thereafter and, by the summer of 1922, Jeanne was living with her aunt at Brighton Beach. As she walked down Surf Avenue, a barker, seeing her pass, departed from his script and beckoned her over. She ignored the man, as she had been brought up to do, believing he was flirting with her. Thirty minutes later, on her walk home, the barker spotted her again. This time he insisted that he was not trying to be fresh. He told her that he was searching for someone her size to work in a magic show. The barker suggested that she go inside and speak with the company manager. Intrigued, Jeanne went inside and met the man in question, Sam Margules. As soon as Margules saw her, he knew that she was it. At 4' 9", Jeanne was small enough to be part of the team.

Jeanne went home to tell her aunt. Horrified, her aunt instructed Jeanne to return to the theatre and inform Mr. Margules that she would not be allowed to work at such an establishment. When the disappointing news was delivered, Margules was not prepared to take no for an answer. He returned with Jeanne to face her aunt and obtain her consent. Margules promised the aunt that he would look after Jeanne as if she were his own daughter. Jeanne joined the troupe. She was one of four girls expected to work from 1:00 p.m. until 1:00 a.m. for twenty-five dollars per week. She was scheduled to perform every two hours with her partner Kitty, a girl whose family owned some conces-

THIS FABULOUS CREATURE was Dai Vernon, a slim young man in his late twenties, with coal black hair that grew in an utterly devastating widow's peak and deep set sparkling grey eyes that gave the effect of being lighted from behind, by indirect lighting inside his skull.

sions at Coney Island. Kitty weighed eighty pounds; Jeanne weighed approximately ninety. As Kitty had a slightly longer neck—an attribute that helped with the illusion—Jeanne was assigned to be the "lower half." This more than suited Jeanne, as she did not have to appear on the stage nor on the bally platform outside the theatre.

Jeanne enjoyed being part of the troupe, although sometimes, to the complete bewilderment and utter consternation of Margules, the illusion didn't go off as well as it should have. Jeanne would sometimes fall asleep in the box and it would take more than a few loud thumps on the platform to wake her up. Unfortunately, these minor disasters occurred when Sam was most anxious to impress visiting magicians with the inimitable manner in which his little troupe performed under his able direction. Sam eventually discovered that Jeanne often crawled into the secret compartment with a box of popcorn or a hot dog and an ice cream cone. As the ventilation was poor and the performer often verbose, the close, dark quarters, in combination with the food, often made her drowsy. When Horace Goldin, the licensor, was visiting the show, Sam took extra precautions that caused Jeanne much discomfort. She wrote,

Once inside, an odor receded, then rolled in, in great waves that became progressively stronger. It finally became unbearable and in my frantic anxiety to get out of the (box), my knees were pushing against the trap in such a manner that poor little Kitty had to exert all her meager strength to hold it down until the time came for her to release it.

Sam had plugged all but two of the air holes with Limburger cheese. Sam was, however, true to his word and looked after Jeanne as if she was family. Jeanne wrote,

Sam had the build of a young bull, a voice like thunder on a summer day, and a heart as tender as a dove's. His complex character was a striking example of the law of compensation. What he lacked in gentlemanly demeanor and sound judgment, he made up for in kindheartedness, generosity and unfailing good humor.

Vernon eventually returned to New York and made a beeline for Coney Island. He heard about Sawing A Woman In Half and asked around for the name of the theatre where it was playing. Upon arriving, he was delighted to learn that Sam Margules was the manager. Jeanne was on hand to see him stroll in,

From the enthusiastic welcome that he received, you might have thought that he was a conquering hero home from the wars or a sailor home from the sea. After being obstreperously welcomed and rapturously embraced by various members of the cast of Horace Goldin's "Sawing a Woman in Half" company … he apologetically consented, after a great deal of coaxing, to do a few simple little tricks. All the girls gravitated to him like steel filings to a magnet and he was completely surrounded by a cackling fluttering group.

This fabulous creature was Dai Vernon, a slim young man in his late twenties, with coal black hair that grew in an utterly devastating widow's peak and deep set sparkling grey eyes that gave the effect of being lighted from behind, by indirect lighting inside his skull.

Although impressed by his appearance, she was not impressed by the card tricks.

Each succeeding trick was greeted with sickening squeals of delight. "Chicken," I thought, as I stood by myself in a far corner, apart from the agitated mass of clucking females, completely disgusted and thoroughly bored.

Suddenly, Margules pushed her into the melee. Sam insisted that Vernon perform a special trick just for Jeanne.

Vernon said, "The trick that I am about to do for your special benefit, young lady, is one absolutely guaranteed to fool even the most intelligent spectator and, since in all honesty, I cannot place you in this category, the trick will undoubtedly be doubly successful."

He then performed a "sucker trick," one in which, by design, the performer makes a miraculous recovery at the spectator's expense. Jeanne, however, refused to take the initial bait. The trick unraveled and Vernon was deflated. He said, "It's a well-known fact that the dumber you are, the harder it is to fool you." Even so, Jeanne was delighted.

Sam drafted Vernon into the troupe. He was required to perform fifteen to twenty minutes of general magic designed to hold the attention of the patrons inside the theatre while the talkers persuaded others on the outside to join them for the grand illusion. Vernon's renditions, which he presented with a matter-of-fact but charming authenticity of classical effects, incorporated new techniques and subtleties. Although Jeanne kept her distance, others, particularly magicians, came to visit. She would later recount,

Word got out that there was a young magician doing a trick they couldn't quite see through. Some of the Carnival workers would come through the back door, without paying; the great majority would stand, there were only seats in front. One day, who do you think were standing there against the wall? Thurston, Horace Goldin and Houdini.

Vernon was thrilled that these three masters had come to see his show. By the end of the summer, Margules and company were invited to perform at the carnival in Havana Park, Cuba. Vernon and Sam set sail but Jeanne stayed home.

Shortly after they opened, Vernon decided once again to change his name. Cubans, like New Yorkers, had their own difficulties pronouncing Dai Vernon. Inspired by the globetrotting Davenport Brothers, Vernon became Dallas Davenport. Sam thought the name was ridiculous and simply called him "Dickie." As at Coney Island, Vernon performed his general magic act before the main attraction. Occasionally, Vernon relieved Sam and conducted the illu-

sion himself. And, just as in New York, each performance brought its own challenges.

When we did sawing a woman in half, we had an American girl, who was the head whom we brought from New York, a very pretty girl. But the feet, we got a native girl. Now the first girl we got was the homeliest girl I have ever seen in my life, she was cross-eyed and had every blemish a girl could have, but her feet were all right. In spite of the fact she was in the box for only a few brief moments, her mother had to chaperone her, and the mother, whom she had probably inherited her looks from, was also cross-eyed. Her mother would sit on the stage and insisted—had to keep her daughter in sight constantly to chaperone her, and even when she went in the box, for the brief moment when they switched the box around, spun it around, her feet disappeared for one second, her mother would even watch, but as soon as she saw her daughter's feet again she would sit and chaperone her. We never gave a performance but that this cross-eyed mother wasn't sitting on the stage watching her daughter. We finally got rid of her and got a prettier girl but still her mother came with her too, but it wasn't so bad because she was an attractive girl and her mother was fairly attractive, but they would sit on the stage, that's how carefully they'd chaperone.

When Havana Park fell under the control of gambling interests from Akron and Dayton, Ohio, and graft became a cost of doing business, Margules elected to return to New York. The troupe returned with him. Vernon, however, decided to stay in Cuba. He saw the possibility of cutting silhouettes.

It was like a gold mine. I made a fortune and got independent as the devil. I was making money hand over fist and the city offered me space in museums to work. "Ah, artista! Oh, magnifico! El rey di mondo." They knew I did tricks, too. I was quite a celebrity. I don't think they had ever seen anybody cut silhouettes; it was a novelty. The city gave me a place to work right in front of the American Club, even put in a special light, all for nothing. I used to leave money in piles and some bills and go and sit almost half a block away; natives would come and look at the picture nobody ever stole a penny.

Just as many modern artists have scrawled thumbnail sketches on napkins and exchanged them for goods and services, Vernon discovered he too could use his craft as currency. For example, he rarely paid for meals. He would do tricks for waitress and restaurant owners. After an impromptu show, they refused to accept his money. Many Cubans were superstitious about magic and as such, Vernon was regarded as a sort of medicine man while on the island. Although Vernon performed at many private parties, most of all he enjoyed the nightlife. He gambled in the casinos and attended shows. He saw his share of unusual novelty acts. When he started dating Cuban women he also discovered that being considered "American" had its advantages.

In those days you could go and visit a Cuban girl and you could—I used to play the piano sometimes a little, in those days—you'd go in and the parents would leave you alone with their daughter and then when it got later, they say, "It's getting late now and they'd call their daughter to bed perhaps, but they'd leave you alone with their daughter, but the natives, they'd never walk out of the room, if the father left the mother would come in or the uncle. I always attributed it to the fact that perhaps they wanted their daughter to get into trouble perhaps with an American and have to marry him, because they wanted to marry their daughters off to Americans.

If, however, the girl loved music and he took her to the opera, he was also expected to take the extended family, a parade of five or six people, and purchase the most expensive seats in the house. After eight months he had had enough and decided to return to New York. The trip home would not be easy.

Jeanne and Kitty at Coney

When Margules purchased their tickets, he anticipated that the entire troupe would return within six months. Vernon discovered that he had overstayed his journey; the ticket had expired. He would have to find an alternative passage home. As a Canadian citizen, he solicited assistance from the British Consul in Cuba, a man named Brooks. The Consul suggested that if Vernon wanted to save money, he could become a member of the crew on a ship bound for New York and desert the ship once it reached port. Vernon did not care what the job was, as long as he got back to Manhattan.

The Consul arranged for Vernon to act as a steward on a ship. Once again, Vernon used the currency of magic to his advantage. He became quite popular on board and was treated like a passenger, given a more comfortable bunk, and wonderful food. He admitted to the crew that he was planning to desert the ship in New York. Although the crew enjoyed his company, they realized that he was no seaman. They said there was no need to desert ship; they would sign his release as "incompetent."

Back in New York he reconnected with Margules. The timing was perfect. It was the late summer of 1923. Margules had been asked by Horace Goldin to stage the Sawing In Half at a charity bazaar in Bayshore, Long Island. Vernon could join the troupe to cut silhouettes at the Bazaar. As it was a three-day event, he would be able to generate some quick cash.

Sam also telephoned Jeanne and asked her to rejoin the troupe. Her salary would be ten dollars per day, meals and daily transportation to and from New York City included, and the opportunity to reconnect with old friends, includ-

ing Kitty. What Sam failed to mention was that he had invited Vernon to join them. She discovered this on her own.

One evening while strolling aimlessly about the grounds, I noticed a compact little group of people clustered together under a bright hanging light. Upon edging closer, I discovered that the center of attraction was my heartily disliked acquaintance of the past summer, Dai Vernon, the magician from "Sawing A Woman in Half" but he wasn't magishing, he was cutting silhouettes. I stayed to watch and after some time, when the crowd had begun to thin out, I heard a voice say, "Did you ever in your life see such eyelashes?" The voice came from a female and she was nudging her companion in an effort to direct her attention to me, at who she was brazenly staring. I suppose she had some reason for staring for at that time my eyelashes were so long that if I glanced up without raising my head, my eyelashes used to become entangled in my eyebrows.

Jeanne was extremely proud of her eyelashes, believing that they made up, in a very small way, for her small stature. Vernon also heard the other woman's remark, for he turned with interest to see the exotic creature. His eyes met hers with a look of startled surprise. Vernon stopped cutting silhouettes to speak with Jeanne and then asked her to wait a few minutes more as he closed up for the night. Jeanne thought that he seemed genuinely pleased to see her. He was. He later recalled:

I made $109 and was just closing when I see this girl. I didn't recognize her—these l-o-n-g eyelashes, an inch and a half long, and I thought they were artificial, but they weren't. Her face looked familiar; I never saw her face, very seldom, because she was always hiding; she used to come in, do her job and then run back to her Aunt. I said, "I know you from somewhere;" she said, "At Coney Island."

I said, "My goodness, I never noticed your eyelashes before." Of course on the silhouette I cut the eyelashes off. When she opened her eyes they'd get caught up there. I'd never got in conversation with her. She seemed to be intelligent. I made a comment and said, "People call these salutes at Coney Island but they are silhouettes."

She confessed that she had never seen Vernon cut silhouettes but had read the history of the craft. She was aware that they were named after Etienne de Silhouette, the finance minister in the court of Louis XIV. She added that she was interested in the arts and was contemplating going to art school herself. Vernon was amazed. It was, however, time for her to return to New York.

Vernon accompanied Jeanne back to the main stage, and later, after joining Sam Margules, Kitty, Horace Goldin and some others, asked her if the two could meet again in a few days back in Manhattan. She agreed.

On their first date, Vernon presented Jeanne with a pair of silhouette scissors, some black gummed paper, a supply mounts, and her first lesson in cutting silhouettes. They met frequently in the fall of 1923. Despite their budding courtship, Jeanne stated that Vernon complained continuously about the way that she treated him.

He maintained that I was cold and cross and mean and that he had never, in his extensive experience with girls, been treated so shabbily. He told me that he had never before found it necessary to make the advances and that he usually had to fight them off.

A letter dated Wednesday, 10:30 p.m., November 6, 1923 from D.W. Vernen, East Onondaga Hotel, Syracuse, New York, however, tells a different story.

My Very Own Darling Sweetheart,

Both of your dear letters arrived safely, one at the Post Office, yesterday—the other here at the hotel to-day. Jeannie dearest you're wonderful—each and every letter that you have ever written to me has been one that even the most highly educated "lady of the land" could justly feel proud of if she had written it. Anyone who had never ever seen you, or heard of you, could see reflected, clearly, vividly and unmistakably, in your letters—your "finesse," your rapier-like keeness [sic] of mind, your alertness to every little thing that transpires and most of all that indescribable, irresistible "something" something magnetic that would captivate any poor mortal no matter how immune or how cold.

Jeannie my virtues are few, probably negligible, however, I can be appreciative and I most certainly, thoroughly appreci-

Dai and Jeanne in the 1920s.

IN THE PAST I was never in any way conceited or imagined myself a 'Beau Brummel', but I did have a certain amount of pride in being from a good family and being always well groomed and apparently of a vivacious and pleasant disposition. It is not the change in me that hurts directly but the fact that you—my own sweet darling little girl, only know the "old shell"—the "silhouette."

ate you—anyone of course would, but I notice things—minutest little details of excellence, that I feel positive others wouldn't. To me, Jeanne darling, you mean everything. My thoughts, my desires, my very being throbs and longs for you. I do so wish to make my little girl happy. Sometimes when I allow myself to think in a cold logical way of what a shadow of my former self I am it hurts. In the past I was never in any way conceited or imagined myself a 'Beau Brummel', but I did have a certain amount of pride in being from a good family and being always well groomed and apparently of a vivacious and pleasant disposition. It is not the change in me that hurts directly but the fact that you—my own sweet darling little girl, only know the "old shell"—the "silhouette." Jeanne darling I have been writing along putting my addled thoughts on paper and I'm going to "ring off" as it is utterly hopeless for me to convey to you the torrent of love and mingled remorse that I sometimes feel.

Vernon concluded,

Well my exquisite little loving lady, if I could write like you I'd send you—at least thirty pages, but letter writing is my weakness as you know, but I shall promise to think of you constantly incessantly and intensely until I see your sweetly pretty little countenance on Sunday. I pawn myself to you and burn the ticket so it's up to you.

More than all my love your "Dai"

Vernon was smitten. In a half-joking manner designed to conceal his insecurity, he asked, "How would you like to travel all around the country, get married and do this silhouette work?" Jeanne indicated that she would like that very much, and they became engaged. Unfortunately, Vernon had little money with which to provide for his future wife. His approach had always been to generate money with short-term solutions rather than steady and reliable employment. So, to earn some extra money, Vernon agreed to sell some of his secrets, for twenty-five dollars, to two New York magic personalities Robert Sherman and John Davis, who operated a magic shop dubbed Sherms, in the Hudson subway. The duo published *Secrets*, a small booklet that described twenty-five card tricks "that anyone can do." They sold the booklet over the counter to amateurs with an interest in card tricks. Although his friend Arthur Finley had published and sold various tricks privately, that is through the advertisements placed in magic industry journals, this was Vernon's first venture tipping his "secrets" publicly.

In February 1924, Vernon returned to Ottawa to inform his mother and brothers of his pending marriage. On Monday evening, March 3, 1924, at St. George's Church Parrish Hall located at the corner of Metcalfe and Gloucester streets in Ottawa, David Verner presented "Sleight of Hand and Silhouettes." Admission cost a quarter and although the tickets indicated that the sale of silhouettes would benefit the Red Shield Drive, past practice would indicate that fifty percent of all proceeds would go directly to Vernon.

He returned to New York by train the next day. On

Jeanne Vernon and the beautiful masks she created

March 5, 1924, Vernon escorted Jeanne to The Little Church Around the Corner. Before they were married, as they were alone, they had to pay the Church four dollars to provide two witnesses. Jeanne wrote,

The sum total of our assets after parting reluctantly with the witness fee plus a small monetary gift to the minister was two dollars and thirty-nine cents. Our worldly possessions consisted of the contents of several suitcases, several pairs of bright shiny silhouette scissors and several packets of black-gummed paper.

Ever optimistic, Vernon considered the pieces of black paper worth their weight in gold.•