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# The IMPOSSIBLE

by DON ROBERT CATLIN



"Then came a blinding flash of light, an odor of burning parchment."

"GENTLEMEN, you of the Wanderlust Club are my friends. Among you are numbered financial wizards, men of scientific renown. Not only because of your worldly standing, but also because of our mutual regard, I have come to you to obtain assistance in freeing the world from the grasp of that monster-octopus, fear!"

To say that we of the club were startled is putting it all too mildly. Travis, the man who had just spoken, had been absent from the country for more than four years, and now, evidently laboring under a terrific strain, he had returned to startle us.

Some there were of us, I am afraid, who thought our friend was unbalanced. But Travis waved us to seat ourselves and calmly called out to the attendant to lock the doors securely.

"My friends," he began, sweeping the semicircle of faces about him with eyes glittering strangely, "several

years ago I left you to go on a rambling tour of the world. In Haiti, that breeding place of wizardry and Black Magic, I chanced to see a little more than an outsider usually witnesses of the clutching grasp those necromancers have upon the fear-bound natives. Perhaps many of you will remember that I have ever been agnostic concerning spiritualism; at any rate, upon seeing the damnable hold those magi have obtained upon the throats of the ignorant natives, my heart was filled with a great pity for them; and, after many days and nights of mulling the horror of it over in my mind, I came to the determination to throw off the yoke from the necks of the ignorant—if possible.

"Some there are who believe that love—or hate—is the strongest of human emotions; yet I think you will agree with me that fear is, beyond cavil, the most soul-stirring emotion of them all. My life was worth nothing to anyone save myself; and I reasoned that if it were possible for me to learn the secrets of Black Magic and spiritualism, by broadcasting throughout the world an explanation of how the seemingly impossible tricks of wizardry were done I might remove that fear of the unknown from the hearts of all.

"I remember thinking, as I started upon my strange quest for knowledge of the mysterious, that, if I were to accomplish my ends, I must needs learn to perform the impossible. But, gentlemen, *the impossible has never been done!* It is quite true that we poor mortals witness some certain thing which is beyond our comprehension, and we dub it magic. I might," he added dryly, "call your attention to Noah Webster's definition of the word 'impossible'."

Whether or not the man were mad, at least he seemed sure of himself, and we of the Wanderlust Club were giving him strict attention. Striding through our midst, Travis went to the window and took up a potted plant. He placed it on the floor at his feet.

"Not with an intention of being theatrical, gentlemen, but merely to show you that I am not taking up your time with a drooling bit of idiocy, I shall show you a few things sometimes performed by magi. For instance: look carefully upon this plant. It is thoroughly healthy, and its flowers very sweet . . . ."

Our eyes fell to the thing; and, as God is my witness, the plant shrivelled and died beneath our gaze!

Travis was smiling. "You have witnessed the impossible? No, no, gentlemen; you have seen this thing, and therefore it can not have been impossible! Are there things impos-

sible? Indeed yes; but rest assured that you shall never see them!"

"A man goes to a mystic; a witch; a medium. He sees and hears things which appear to be supernatural. His wits are befuddled, there is an indefinable fear in his breast, and he imagines more than he sees or hears. He credits to spirits the mystery of the revelations which have been made to him. As for myself, I have seen things in my search for the solution of the riddle of the universe which I would not have thought to be possible; yet I have solved the mystery, and tonight I shall show you some of these things.

"As children, you witnessed the magician upon the stage as he produced rabbits and geese and eggs and miles upon miles of ribbon from an ordinary hat. And you were, indeed, witnessing child's play. The adult mind, broadened in scope of knowledge, demands deeper mysteries. Tonight you shall see them, gathered from Haiti, Egypt, India, and China. My reason in thus displaying these mysteries: before proceeding farther with my astounding revelations, I want each of you to see for himself, for seeing is believing!"

TRAVIS paused for breath, then proceeded with his novel and weird demonstration. Trick after trick, things which I would have staked my life upon as being impossible, startling, shaking us all to the very foundations of our souls!

In the tense moments of the dénouement of a rather bewildering bit of magic, Amos Green sipped at a glass of water the attendant had just handed him.

"I am tremendously sorry," called Travis, "for the water you are drinking, Amos, is a virulent poison!"

We were all startled; but Amos, grinning sheepishly, in a gesture of foolish bravado drained the glass.

"Great God!" came from the lips of the onlookers as the limp body of Amos Green sagged and slipped forward on the floor with a soft thud. "Broome—Broome!"

But Dr. Broome was already kneeling beside the still, prostrate form.

"Dead!" he whispered in an awed voice. "Travis, you must indeed have eaten of the Fruit of the Tree of Life and Death!" Then, his voice ringing with fury: "I thought at first you were joking—that you might have connived with Green—but the man is a corpse!"

A shiver, creeping flesh, sudden chills seized upon me. I wanted to rush from the room, felt an impulse to scream, yet something seemed to hold me fast in my chair and stilled the shriek unborn upon my cold lips.

"Pardon me, Doctor," said Travis. "Please make no mistake; you have tested the body for signs of life?"

Broome drew himself up. "I think that there can be no reflection upon my professional conduct, sir! Would that I were mistaken! I have applied every known means of ascertaining life and it is an unquestionable fact that the man is dead, a corpse. There is no respiration; no action of the heart, lungs, or other organs. The man is dead!"

"Please do not think that I wish to discredit you, Doctor. But will you stake your professional reputation upon your statement that Amos Green is without life?"

Unhesitatingly came Broome's answer: "Absolutely!"

Our attention had been centered upon Travis and the doctor. The former pointed out, "Then may I call your attention to the presumed corpse?"

We turned—to see Amos Green in the act of rising to his feet; the muscles of his throat were contracting as though he were but taking up the thread of life at the very point at

which he had left it. He was swallowing that last sip of water!

Broome, poor soul, felt his way to a chair and sank into it, consternation written upon his features; while Amos, dazed and uncomprehending, stared queerly at Travis.

"Once again," commented the wanderer, "I have proved that the impossible can not be done. Oh, I realize that it appeared to be such! But consider well: Dr. Broome—to whom I now extend my apologies for my seeming courtesy—declared Amos to be dead. The question in your minds is: Was he really dead? I shall permit you to answer that question for yourselves; but, accepting the doctor's statement, we shall assume that Green was, in fact, without life. I killed him; and then I brought him back to life. He now lives, none the worse for his brief sojourn in that outer world about which we mortals know nothing. But the point I wish to stress is this: assuming that I did kill him, and assuming that I did bring him to life again, then, as you have seen this with your own eyes it can not have been an impossibility! There is no such thing as doing the impossible!"

"You lie!" came a strange, small voice from behind the semicircle of chairs about Travis.

WE WHIRLED—and saw a small, slender, withered, ancient-looking old Chinaman. How he had gotten entrance to the room God alone knows, for the doors had been locked and members of the club had been seated in each of the large windows which looked out upon the teeming streets below. No man had seen the Chinaman enter!

"And I repeat," the ancient spoke again, "that you lie! The impossible has been done—and shall be done again!"

Senses whirling, uncomprehending, I turned back to face Travis; and

surely if ever one man saw another undergo a living hell, then I witnessed all the torture of devilish ingenuity being concentrated upon the soul of the man I knew as Travis.

There is a legend that, his soul having been so great, Lincoln's body shrank in dimension upon that soul's departure; and now, before my very eyes, I saw the body of my friend shrink, and I knew that his soul had left him, that it had gone out into the ether to combat that of the Chinaman. Here in this room a tremendous battle of will-power was raging.

I saw great beads of sweat break out on Travis' forehead. His eyes were wide, staring; then, with a little jerking of his flesh, he was himself again.

"You are too much for me, I admit," he smiled.

The Chinaman seemed to pity him. "Think you that the pupil may teach the master?" he asked quietly.

Instantly I knew that it had been from this wrinkled old Chinaman that Travis had learned a great part of what he knew of magic. But why had the Chinaman followed him so mysteriously into these rooms? Had my friend—? My thoughts were running wild.

"I might choose no better time than this to explain the situation," Travis was saying calmly. "Perhaps some of you gentlemen have been wondering just what my object was in displaying the magic I have learned. If you will be patient a moment, I shall satisfy your curiosity.

"You, my friends, and myriad hosts of human beings in every country and clime, have been, and, but for me, always would be subject to the age-old superstition that spirits communicate with the living and that with the aid and assistance of these spirits, certain persons are able to accomplish supernatural acts. As for myself, I believe in God, and there my belief ceases. I do not believe

that spirits help or restrain us, for we are free agents.

"Four years ago, I commenced a world-wide search for knowledge of Black Magic—supernaturalism—spiritualism—call it what you will. I started with the assumption that, while there is such a thing as the impossible, it had never been done. And, gentlemen, I have proved my case.

"Call back your Bible-study days; recall the days of Moses; picture him among the priests of Egypt, before Pharaoh. Moses sent plagues upon the Egyptians—and the magicians duplicated his miracles! Now if, as the Bible states—and I believe it to be true—God lent power to Moses to perform these miracles, then who lent power to the necromancers of Egypt? There, gentlemen, is a question! My answer—and the only logical rejoinder, so it seems to me—is that the priests of Egypt used trickery.

"I have shown you who are gathered here some few things which you could not understand, things which bewildered you, frightened you, and yet I have devoted but four years to the study of magic. You, men of scientific renown, men of hard-headed business acumen, have known fear this night. Consider what groveling fear you might have felt had you been of the masses, or of lesser intelligence! Suppose I had been born among magi, suckled and nourished in an atmosphere of intrigue and mysticism; do you doubt that I might now perform even more wondrous deeds?

"And yet they would all have been deeds of trickery! Of these things which you have seen, and of their explanations, I shall speak further at a later time, for I see that my esteemed visitor is becoming uneasy.

"Some small satisfaction I shall permit him by publicly admitting that I am a thief." Calmly, as a ripple of disbelief swept over us, Travis thrust his hand into an inner

pocket of his coat and withdrew a small, stained, tattered, ancient-appearing book. "I have here a chronicle of—but wait. I must begin at the beginning.

"It is well known that the magicians and priests of the various Eastern cults have kept knowledge of magic alive by handing that wisdom down from father to son. You might torture or kill, but the priests died with their secrets of necromancy locked in their breasts. Only to their sons or successors would they impart their learning. And down through the ages, the peoples of the earth have been as dust beneath the feet of the sorcerers, bound to them by a chain of fear hitherto unbreakable. It is my purpose to *break that chain!*"

"And now, a moment of my history for the four years just past. A few months here, several there, applying myself diligently and with the aid of unlimited funds judiciously spent, I passed from one sorcerer to another, learning what each had to impart. No need for me to go into intricate details—time forbids. Let it suffice that at last, a year ago, I had seemingly reached my goal. I could duplicate all the bags of tricks displayed by magicians of Egypt, India, China. And yet I knew that somewhere there must be a source of knowledge. I think that it cost me a part of my soul, but I found that source!"

"This man"—pointing to the stolid old Chinaman—"lived in a hovel near a temple far from the haunts of man. How I found him, God alone knows. But I did find him, and, by throwing myself whole-heartedly into a living lie, I caused him to believe me a sincere and devout member of his cult. And this little, wrinkled old man held in the hollow of his hand all the secrets of eternity!"

"Remember, please, that the knowledge possessed by the ordinary magician or priest is but a very small

part of a great whole. Knowing comparatively little, he has but little to impart to his son or successor. So great are the secrets combined that no man could ever hope to master one tenth part of them; and so, perforce, they must be written. This book"—holding aloft the stained and tattered parchment—"holds within its covers the answer to every mystery of the universe! I stole it from this Chinaman—for all humanity I became a thief.

"And now you know why I have come to you with these astounding revelations; now you comprehend why I have performed these acts of magic tonight. I know that I have convinced you that I am telling the truth; and, together, we shall bend every effort, lend every aid to broadcast to the world these logical and simple explanations of hitherto inexplicable mysteries of the supernatural. And when we shall have informed the world of the insidious evil of the magi, then we shall have removed for all time the clutching, clawing grasp of fear from the hearts of those who know no better than to give credence to the supernatural!"

**E**XHAUSTED by the force of his fierce passion, Travis smiled triumphantly at the Chinaman. "This sorcerer's presence, sirs, can mean but one thing. He has trailed me, over thousands of miles, intent upon regaining possession of this book; for exposure of its contents will wreak incalculable ruin to the carefully nurtured, age-old belief. Well"—smiling into the Chinaman's eyes—"he shall not have it!"

The Chinaman made no remonstrance; he remained still and silent as a carven statue.

Travis thrust out the book, so that the Chinaman's eyes might fall upon it. "Permit me to point out to you," he said, "that while I did not succeed in overpowering your will, a

few minutes past, yet at the same time you found to your sorrow that you could not conquer my own. Checkmate! Physically you are unable to overcome me; and you know quite well that, sorcerer though you are, I can thwart your magic with other magic equally as powerful. Therefore, I shall keep the book."

Now, for the first time, the Chinaman moved. There was something sinister about his sinuous, gliding motion, and I felt a premonition of impending evil, terror, horror!

The Chinaman halted, spoke swiftly. "One thing you forget; you have not yet mastered *all* the secrets—you are a fool! I know a thousandfold more than you. Can you hope to resist the accumulated knowledge of eons of time?"

I perceived a sardonic twitching at Travis' mouth.

"I read your thoughts—you should have guarded them more carefully." This was Travis' answer to the Chinaman. "You are thinking that this book is written in the very oldest form of written language, and that you alone possess the key whereby the writings become legible and intelligible. But you are wrong in your assumption." Travis' voice rang shrilly in my ears as he turned from the Chinaman to us who were his friends. "You may not believe me when I tell you this thing; but that man does not understand one word of English, and he has been speaking in the purest of the Mongolian dialects. Yet you and I have understood him perfectly, and he has understood every word I have uttered. The explanation is merely—telepathy. When I speak, the thought-wave is impelled from my brain in perfect synchronization with the spoken word, and it is the thought which he has understood; likewise our comprehension of his speech. Now, it is true that, as an ordinary man, I might never hope to read the

contents of this record, for any attempt to decipher it would result in failure. But what this master necromancer has forgotten is that when these writings were put on parchment by the guiding genius of Black Magic, it was merely thought transferred to paper and that thought is ever the same, changeless. I have but to concentrate, and this ancient thought instantly becomes intelligible—"

A wailing shriek broke from the lips of the Chinaman; shrill, terrifying in its intensity. His face blazed with the demoniacal fury of a man gone mad with rage and hatred. Too late, he realized that Travis could, indeed, solve all that which he would have given his life to conceal.

**W**HY we of the Wanderlust Club did not interfere none of us was ever able to ascertain, afterward; it was as if we were chained to our chairs by an irresistible force.

Travis and the Chinaman were almost face to face; their eyes burned queerly as will-power met will-power in mortal, terrific struggle. How long they stood thus I do not know; it seemed years, yet it could have been at most only a few minutes.

They say that a Chinaman's features do not betray his inner emotions; still, I fancied that I saw a trace of chagrin, of disappointment, on the face of this little, wrinkled, dried-up old Chinaman. For a moment he was baffled—even I knew that. And then I saw him concentrating upon the book in Travis' hand.

The atmosphere of the room became super-charged with a crackling, rending power one could almost hear! Then came a blinding flash of light; an odor of burning parchment.

In the very hands of Travis, the books of secrets had burst into a devastating flame!

"You devil from hell!" screamed Travis. "That secret—lost to the world since the day of the priests of Baal and the Prophet! God sent devouring fire upon the water-soaked altar and the priests of Baal could not duplicate the feat because the only one of their number who knew the secret of devouring fire had vanished. Lost throughout the ages; and it now appears at the command of this necromancer!"

The Chinaman flicked a skinny, clawlike hand in the direction of the ashes upon the floor. "I told you there were secrets which you did not know," he commented softly. "And there are yet other mysteries—"

Travis whipped out an ugly, squat-looking automatic. "You have prevented me from publishing that record of deviltry," he said, "yet I can not permit you to return to your temple and continue the breeding of evil to visit upon the ignorant and ill-advised. As you have destroyed that which would have liberated the world from fear, so I shall destroy you."

There was a cold finality in his voice; and scarce had the words left his lips than he fired. The shot reverberated through the room. Came the fumes of burned powder, acrid. But the Chinaman was still standing, unmoved.

An expression of incredulity touched Travis' face. I could see the puzzled, dazed, uncomprehending look in his eyes, for at that distance he could not have missed. He squeezed the stock of the automatic yet again—and again.

Almost together those two last shots; almost as one, so rapidly were they fired.

And the Chinaman had not moved—until now. With one swift step he

reached the person of the man who was my friend, and I saw a glittering flash of gleaming metal.

Travis crumpled. His body bent in the middle, sagging; then he crashed to the floor.

"A little knowledge is a dangerous thing," murmured the Chinaman, quite distinctly. A queer glint of a peculiarly greenish tint showed in his eyes. Then slowly, slowly, his lids drooped lower and lower. As his eyes were masked by those lowering lids, he toppled as might a tower undermined at its base, and fell to the floor beside the body of Travis.

The spell was broken; for the first time in an hour I moved. Travis was in my arms, his life-blood staining my garments, while all about me I heard horrified cries.

Stark terror depicted upon their faces, they backed away from those still bodies; all but Dr. Broome, who was now crouched beside me.

I, too, arose and backed away. We waited an eternity.

As Broome turned, there was an awed hush.

"Travis—and that other—both dead! Travis had learned too much, and he has paid the penalty. For, alone, he could not overthrow that which had existed since first the world began.

"Gentlemen, tonight we have seen the Chinaman kill our friend after three bullets had struck him. Travis did not miss, for, in a space which might be covered by a half-dollar coin, three bullets smashed their way into the Chinaman's heart.

"Therefore, when he took that last step forward and killed Travis, *the Chinaman was already a dead man.*"

His voice trailed away into a whisper: "We have witnessed the accomplishment of the impossible!"

