

***Keeper of one of the world's  
best-guarded secrets***

---



# THE GILLIE GILLIE MAN

***By Lloyd G. Frost***

HE WILL be found wherever tourists or weekenders gather — in the courtyard of the Galle Face Hotel, beneath the shade trees at Negombo Resthouse, on the terrace at Mount Lavinia.

He may wear a short-sleeved shirt and khaki shorts; he may wear a sarong; his costume may be wholly nondescript. But always he carries a dirty cotton cloth sack, bulging with the paraphernalia of his fraternity, and a flat, round wicker basket.

He may be in his early twenties, he may be in his seventies, and he may be ageless. He may possess the powerful physique of a wrestler, the blurred avoirdupois of late adolescence or the stringy astringency of old age, but he surely possesses one characteristic common to all his guild. He is one of the elect — one of the world's truly great conjurers — an Indian gillie gillie man.

Legend has it that all the famous magicians have watched him, time and again without number, with all their own special knowledge of the

tricks of the trade brought to bear on the effort, to fathom his seemingly naïve routine. And all have failed.

Their great illusions and baffling mysteries are performed on a stage equipped with every known mechanical aid. They wear costumes that belie their elaborately achieved effect of simplicity with many hidden pockets and caches. They are separated from their audiences by the depth of the orchestra pit, and at least a part of the width of the stage. They have at their command extensive facilities and tricks of lighting.

The gillie gillie man has none of these. His stage is the open ground wherever he chances to find an audience with sufficient spare rupees to make it worth his while to give a performance. This need not be much. As little as five rupees will induce him to drop his sack and squat down to begin his age-old routine.

His costume leaves his arms bare to his shoulders and his legs to mid-

thigh; what little there may be of it affords no hiding places. He is separated from his audience by only such distance as the audience itself chooses to maintain. They may ring him round at arm's length, peer over his shoulders, watch from any or all sides. So long as he is allowed sufficient space in which to move his arms he is unperturbed. His lighting is only the blazing tropical sun overhead which affords no deceptive shadows nor permits any hidden strings.

Like all conjurers, he has his patter. It is a hodgepodge of Hindustani, Singhalese, Tamil, English, and other tongues or dialects, without coherent meaning — except, perhaps, to the gillie gillie man himself.

The gillie gillie man's routine is the same wherever you find him. Much of it appears to be simple legerdemain, as in truth it is, but legerdemain performed with such dazzling speed and homespun sincerity as to make the efforts of the best stage performers seem colorless and labored.

**A**LTHOUGH in itself an exhibition of skill worthy of anyone's note, the various sleights with which he regales his audience are but hors d'oeuvres to his world-famed *pièce de résistance* — The Mango Trick.

This illusion is bracketed in conversation and print with the Indian Rope Trick but there is a vast gulf between. The latter is not recorded

as ever having actually been witnessed by any person living or dead on testimony worthy of belief. Ask the gillie gillie man and he will tell you, "Master, rope trick not performed for one thousand years."

I saw him first squatting on a small patch of ground between the corner of the hotel and the driveway. We were setting out for a stroll along the seawall when he made his pitch and I nodded acceptance. Tossing his sack to one side, he squatted down on his heels and placed the flat wicker basket at arm's length in front of him on the ground.

With a tuneless series of undulating phrases on his traditional gourd, he brought out from under the lid of the basket a deadly, swaying cobra. We watched fascinated as he played to, then talked to in endless patter, this beautiful but wicked personification of sudden death. With a light slap on the side of its head, the cobra then slithered back inside the wicker basket and he placed it behind him.

In quick succession he now performed several of the best and oldest tricks of legerdemain — elementary feats, some of them, but they were being performed in brilliant sunlight with the audience standing around in a close circle!

But now with the palm of his hand he smoothed the earth over a surface of two or three square feet. With his wand he then dug a hole the size of his fist in the firm soil.

From his bag he produced a mango

seed and held it up to view. It is four inches in length, brown, and slightly fuzzy looking, shaped like a huge, very flat bean. He placed it on end in the hole he had dug, swept in the loose earth and packed it around and over the seed. He was preparing to perform his *chef-d'oeuvre*, the illusion for which only the members of his centuries-old guild hold the secret.

He sent a boy for water, poured a little over the spot where the seed was planted, and covered it with one of his brass cups, bottom up. Squatting well back from the prepared place, he picked up his yard of soiled cotton cloth, holding it by the corners, stretched out, and exhibited each side in turn. With his bare arms stretched straight out, he flung it out to spread over the cup.

Now he took up his gourd pipe and wheezed a string of tuneless notes. Holding the pipe in one hand, he took a crude rag doll, perhaps five inches long, and waved this over the hidden cup. Abandoning the pipe, he moved the doll in small circles, chanting some unintelligible mumbo-jumbo. With one hand he whipped the cloth away and for a moment continued his adjuration, with the doll circling the cup.

Dropping the doll, he took the base of the cup between thumb and forefinger and lifted it well away from the ground. In the center of the spot where it had rested, where the seed had been planted, three or four fresh, green leaves were pro-

truding an inch or so above the ground.

I STEPPED within a pace of them and leaned over to examine them carefully. They had all the appearance of a plant breaking fresh ground. The earth around them showed no signs of disturbance, still bearing the print of the palm that patted it down.

Now the conjurer laid aside the cup and, again exhibiting the cloth, swept it out to lie spread flat on the ground, except for a small hump over the leaves. He slid his bare arms under the cloth, his hands working visibly under it at the point where the leaves had broken ground. The cloth began to rise, higher, higher, its edges drawing in, until it was well over a foot above the ground, draped around some yielding, swaying object that distended it in roughly hemispherical contour.

With a final word of patter the gillie gillie man withdrew his arms and took the cloth by two corners — a magnificent flourish whipped it away. Standing there erect, firmly planted stems emerging from the spot where the seed had been planted, was the bush of a young mango tree — a sparkling, immaculately clean mass of long green leaves, perhaps sixteen inches in diameter.

The gillie gillie man smiled broadly in satisfaction at the “Oh’s” and “Ah’s” of his audience. He stripped one of the foot-long leaves from the plant and went about the watching

group, breaking it in pieces and offering them for inspection. Squatting again beside the plant, he uprooted it to show the seed, festooned with short roots, clinging to the stems.

I extended a hand. Without hesitation he laid the plant in it. There could be no slightest doubt that this plant grew from this seed. Five pencil-size green, stiff shoots sprung from the opened seed; they were firmly attached by nature. I tested their structure. They were pliant but could not be bent to any extent without fracture. The long, green leaves were moist and as immaculate as if freshly washed by a summer shower. The roots were spreading fine tentacles with earth clinging to them as if the plant had just been plucked from its bed in a nursery.

Since then I have watched the performance of this trick by a dozen performers. I have seen some of them perform it on several different occasions, on the open ground, in a heap of clean sand on a table or a pavement. I have stood before, behind and beside the conjurer, so close as to bring about contact in some of his movements, and as I tried vainly to perceive even the faintest hint of how it was done, I remembered that many of the world's foremost magicians had tried the same thing and failed.

The long arm of coincidence reaches far to create startling and bewildering events and situations. I know of none more amazing and mystifying than that occurring when the gillie gillie man foils modern science.



### *Among the Mourners*

While I was stirring my black coffee in an attempt to coax it down from the boiling point, the friendly waitress addressed the doleful, elderly character on the next stool.

"I didn't see you in here yesterday, Mr. Woelke."

"No, I couldn't make it. I went to a funeral. And say, that was about the biggest and the saddest funeral I was ever to. I never see so many people and so many cars. The place was chock-full of flowers, and the organ music just about had me crying."

"Whose funeral was it, Mr. Woelke?" The young lady's voice was full of sympathy. "A relative of yours?"

"No, it wasn't. The minister mentioned the name a time or two but I didn't quite get it."

Contributed by WILLIAM F. SAWYER, Racine, Wisconsin

# What the Greek People Really Think of the U.S.A.

BY KING PAUL OF GREECE



---

*Editor's Note:* So many unkind things have been said about the United States recently by our European friends and allies that the following comments by King Paul of Greece are most refreshing. The King was speaking at a luncheon given by the Washington press corps for him and the Queen. The very obvious sincerity with which he spoke was even more impressive than his words.

---

WE IN GREECE feel we have discovered the real and true America. It is not just a place and a people. It is an idea and an ideal. We Greeks are better equipped than others to see and understand this. From the beginning of history Greece has been the crossroad at which conflicting civilizations and great human migrations have met.

We Greeks have suffered the hardships and confusions that come from being at the point of impact. In order to survive for the past two thousand years and conserve our

religion and our national consciousness we have had to develop an extraordinary capacity to recognize and understand new ideas, new truths and new values, more quickly than other peoples.

We in Greece think that we have come to understand the greatness and beauty of the spiritual concept which is the very essence of America.

I sometimes think that you yourselves have not yet recognized the colossal help that you have been to all of us in Europe. You may now think I am only talking about the material help, without which many of us, and quite certainly Greece, would be today in a pitiful situation.

No, ladies and gentlemen, I am talking about something that is far more important and of far greater consequences to all of us. You have given us spiritual leadership, for us to follow or to reject. How you have done this, I will explain.

When the war was over, the con-