

KARL BARTONI

A Most Remarkable Life In Magic

By Larry White

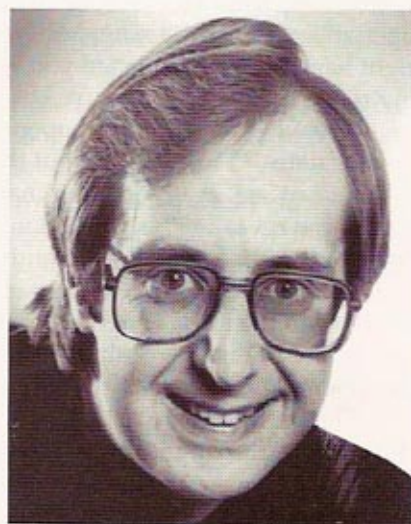
Karl Bartoni was born in the English seaside resort of Blackpool, where he still resides. His grandmother was a soprano singer (who, interestingly, was once on the same bill as David Devant) and her husband was heavily involved in the back stage workings of theaters. This pair kept young Karl entertained for hours with simple magic, which obviously had a lasting influence on him. And, although Karl had little contact with her, a cousin, Violet Carson, became famous playing the part of Ena Sharples in the British soap, *Coronation Street*. For sure, show business flowed in the veins of young Karl Bartoni.

As a boy Karl became fascinated with Al Koran, Chan Canasta and very early David Nixon shows which appeared regularly on British TV in the fifties and sixties. Although he may not have understood half of what was going on, those programs captivated him. By the age of seven he was hooked on anything connected to magic and was introduced to Murray's Magic Mart, owned and operated by the famous Australian Escapologist, Murray, who was retired from active performing.

Weekly visits to Murray followed and by the age of 16 Murray had encouraged and mentored Karl in most aspects of magic. Although Karl was very keen on platform magic and mentalism, Murray encouraged Karl to pursue escapology, and gave him a thorough grounding in that specialized field.

Karl had two other interests at the time that ran parallel to magic: horse riding and the Blackpool Tower Circus. Blackpool's major tourist attraction is a version of the Eiffel Tower, the base of which is hidden by a building that also houses an ornately decorated circus, which was famous for the quality of its performers and animal acts. Karl owned his own horse and at sixteen began working as a ring-boy in the circus. The circus had a rare feature for its final act and finale. At the end of every show there was a blackout and four minutes later, when the lights came up, the audience was captivated by the sight of colorfully lit fountains – and the ring was now filled with 72,000 gallons of water.

By 1970, at the age of twenty-one, Karl had become the lead ring-boy in the circus and, because of his experience with horses, was very involved with the various horse acts which appeared there. At the same time, the internationally famous clown, Charlie Cairoli, (who was the resident clown), took Karl under his wing and gave him walk-on parts in his act as a stooge. His day started at dawn, cleaning and exercising the horses. Then, along with the other ring-boys, he did the general cleaning and preparation work for the shows. During the show Karl was a Cossack rider in the first act, made a quick change to ring-boy for the next three acts, then another quick change into a costume for Cairoli's



Karl Bartoni





Karl Bartoni as magician

first act, and another quick change into another costume for a knockabout acrobatic horse act, and then was back to ring-boy for most of the rest of the show. Finally he stooged for Cairol's last act and ended up soaking wet! Two-and-a-half hours later everything was repeated for the evening show! While following this rigorous schedule Karl was also honing and rehearsing his stage magic act, which was designed to play in the then popular "Old Time Musical Hall" revivals. Then Murray suggested Karl try something a bit different, which changed his direction forever.

Murray persuaded Karl that the only way to achieve instant recognition was to perform a major publicity stunt – such as the classic underwater packing crate escape. Murray shrugged off the fact that Karl was a non-swimmer. He maintained that success with the stunt depended only on breath control and not panicking. Karl wasn't so sure about that, but he did have all the facilities of the circus at his disposal, including twelve willing assistants (the other ring-boys), riggers, workshops and a wonderful place to practice. He was given special permission by the management for rehearsals using the Ring itself and it's unique floor that could drop and expose the 72 thousand gallon tank of water.

Murray put Karl in touch with Jack Gillespie, an eighty-year-old prop builder of the "old school." Jack not only built the crate but also suggested the routine Karl

would use. Karl would be bound and placed in the crate. The crate would be sealed and taken by launch (with all the local press on board) to the center of Blackpool's Stanley Park Lake and dumped in. There should be no bubbles on the surface of the water AND to get everyone thinking that it had gone wrong, Karl was to remain under water for around two and a half minutes, with suitable dramatics when he surfaced. "This sounded great," says Karl, "but I had no clue how I was to remain under water for such a period of time. I began doubting that I could even do the escape and began to hope that the local authorities would not agree so that I could back out without losing face.

"Abbott's plans and methods for doing the Packing Crate Escape made it all sound so simple," says Karl, "but in reality nothing was. Once the crate was built there were many problems to solve, not the least of which was staying under water for as long as possible.

"The crate wanted to float like a cork and in the end, eighteen 14 pound weights had to be put in to keep it down. Then the assistants had a real struggle to man handle the crate onto and overboard the motor launch. I also bobbed to the surface, and had to resort to a lead diving belt to keep me down.

"After every practice session the wood would swell and jam the trap for days. The crate had to be dismantled, waterproofed and rebuilt.

"I was at ease under water but could not hold my breath for longer than thirty seconds, and I can assure you that a ten-foot-long snorkel does not work! That's how green I was at that time. I paid for self hypnosis and breath control lessons and finally contacted the leaders of a diving club (who were going to be present at the escape as a rescue team). They came up with three great solutions which, combined, would enable me to stay under water for as long as I liked without any tell-tale bubbles. The first part of the system required the use of a very dangerous old diving procedure in which I had to saturate my system with oxygen, almost to the point of black out, just before the performance. They would be on hand to administer first aid in the form of CO₂ if I did black out. The second part was a really cool piece of equipment which they designed for me to have built. This was placed on the bed of the lake days in advance of the escape. The third part was a back up based on an illusion principal.

"Jack wanted me to play it as a raw beginner (no problem there) to draw the press in and have everyone think that I was in serious trouble below water. I was to surface just as the divers were going in to rescue me. That's just how it went!

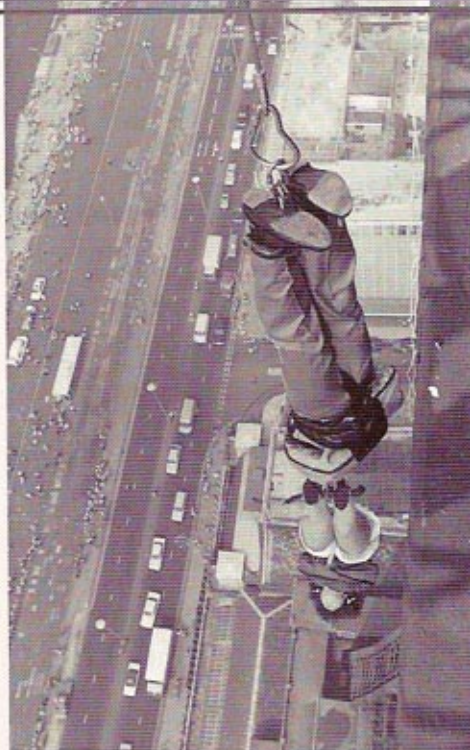
The public escape stunt took place on August 3rd, 1970 in Blackpool's Stanley Park Lake and was a huge success. Karl succeeded in freeing himself from several restraints and the packing crate while underwater. All went well, and Karl had so much fun doing this he de-

cided to specialize in outdoor publicity and promotional escape stunts. For the rest of the circus season he was inundated with offers of help from many of the artists in the circus. He was allowed to use their aerial rigging and safety nets to practice straitjacket and rope escapes while hanging upside down from the circus ceiling. Little did he realize at that time what a valuable year this had been for him and how his intimate knowledge of the Tower building would work into his future.

In 1973, the circus management offered him training and better employment as Head Stage electrician at their famous Opera House Theatre elsewhere in Blackpool. It was not long before he had his fellow theater staff friends hoisting him up above the stage by the ankles for practice sessions!

Around that time, Karl devised what was to become his "signature" escape, one which has never been copied. Supporting the full weight of a girl assistant hanging below him, Karl escaped from bonds while he, himself, hung from a crane suspended by a burning rope! A circus artist designed a special skin-tight body-harness which Karl wore under his clothes. A single cable, attached to the harness, emerged from behind Karl's neck. When his ankles were hooked onto a crane and he was lifted into the air, upside down, the cable dangled down and a swing was attached to the harness. A glamorous girl sat on the swing. Having the extra weight of a girl pulling on him made the escape much more difficult and painful, which was readily appreciated by the audience. Not only did Karl have to take that weight, but also he could not do the usual wriggling about useful in escaping from a straitjacket. They also clearly understood that should the rope break both Karl's and the girl's innocent life would end! Karl says with a chuckle, "The main problem with the escape, apart from the pain and difficulty, was the fact that I needed a new girl almost every performance as no one ever wanted to do it a second time."

Karl's daring escapes made him quite a celebrity and he regularly appeared at various venues. He fondly remembers doing escapes on and overboard the QE 2. Many of his escapes were conducted under dangerous conditions. He was buried alive, bound and suspended from burning ropes, and escaped from regulation strait-jackets, handcuffs, ropes, chains, coffins and other often painful restraints. His was a perilous lifestyle in which, often in admiration of Houdini, he repeatedly had undertakers



The Double Straitjacket Escape!

dusting off their coffins.

Throughout the 1980s, Karl specialized in presenting these types of outdoor promotional stunts for various entertainment giants such as Long Life Beer and Canadian Club Whiskey. He was acclaimed by two public relations companies as "Europe's most publicized escapologist" as a result of some of his most notable stunts.

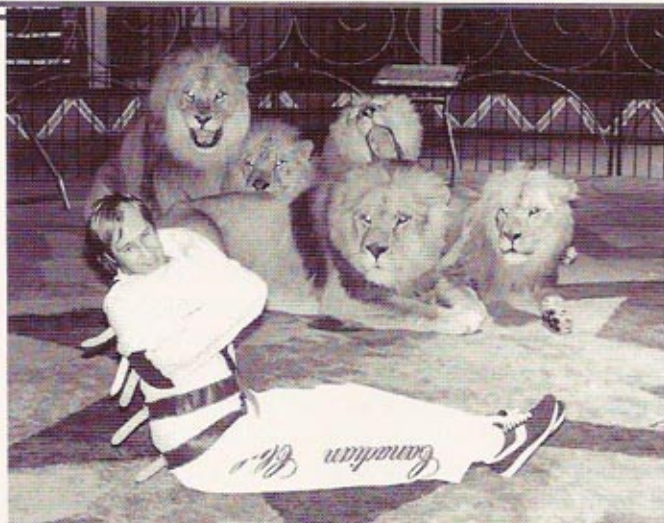
In the most notable of these, perhaps, Karl made death-defying history by escaping from bonds whilst hanging by his ankles from the top of the famous Blackpool Tower. This was a feat of skill and daring which no one previously had been allowed to attempt, including Houdini who applied twice for permission and was denied. Why Karl? He explains, "I had been granted permission because I could supply the required insurance cover and had already worked out every little detail with

my old friends, the tower structure riggers." He presented three escapes that day. In the first he was bound in ropes and sash cords and lowered by a hand winch over the edge of the tower top, about five hundred feet above the ground. The second escape was from a straitjacket while a male partner tried to also escape from a straitjacket while hanging from and below him (a variation of his signature escape). The third escape of the day was the same as the second, but with his female partner escaping from a straitjacket whilst hanging from him. By this time the swing had been discarded in favor of this double escape – kind of a race between master and apprentice.

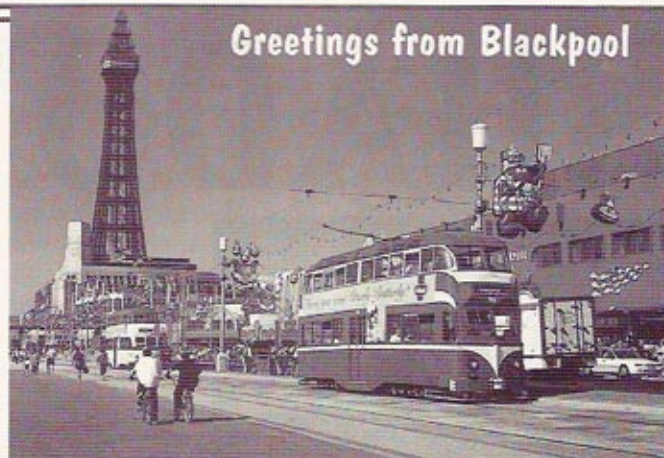
Another of Karl's truly dangerous stunts took place in 1985. In the Hippodrome Circus (Great Yarmouth, England), he was bound in a straitjacket and laid on the ground, alone, inside a cage with five growling male African Lions! An interesting side note is that a year later one of these "tame" (Karl had been assured) lions turned on the trainer and left him critically injured.

In 1986, one stunt performance proved to be truly "hair-raising." Crowds of people watched Karl hang by his ankles from a burning rope ninety feet in the air, trying to free himself from a strait-jacket with a circus artist hanging below him BY HER HAIR! (See page 48.) This was the ultimate variation of his signature escape. Karl was fortunate to have his circus friends and performers share their special skills with him. Still, this was very dangerous, and in the shadows always lurked the possibility that he could kill himself and possibly a helpless girl, too!

Although not an escape, thousands of people will al-



Karl and the Lions



Greetings from Blackpool



Top: The Blackpool Tower. On the facing page Karl supports the full weight of an assistant as both escape from straitjackets while hanging from the Blackpool tower. Above, Karl and his bride exchange marriage vows high above the Blackpool beach!

ways remember Karl Bartoni for his wedding. Recalling that Houdini once stood up in front of the American Congress and declared his love for his wife, Bess, Karl wanted to do something similar for his bride-to-be, Wendy. So in May, 1985, with a vicar, choir and even a church organ firmly ensconced on the top of the Blackpool Tower, Karl and Wendy were lowered from it's top in a flower decorated open cage. They said their vows while standing on a plank in mid-air 450 feet above the heads of a crowd of thousands of watching people. Karl smiles when he recalls that, "Wendy wore white... with a face to match." Not surprisingly, it was a wedding which captured headlines all over the world.

Karl was forced to give up escapology in 1986 because of a heart problem and he briefly moved into the realms of Mentalism. He says, "I was especially disappointed at having to give up the escapes because I had two "world first" escapes in the planning stage which I wanted to do before retiring from escapology. I sometimes feel that by today's standards my performances pale in comparison to ones being currently performed by artists in the States, but mine were on the cutting edge of the type being performed in this country at the time."

His life took another turn in the nineties when Karl encountered the bizarre magic and effects of Mary Tomich (Thaumysta Magic) and that set him going on what he describes as "a much more interesting path."

His fascination with bizarre / storytelling magic continues to this day. He has co-organized two bizarre conventions, called Convocations, in his home town of Blackpool and he still arranges the annual Edinburgh Gatherings for bizarrists. Edinburgh, because that is where his late good friend Charles Cameron lived until his death, and Charles was delighted to be able to play host at these Gatherings.

Since 2001 Karl Bartoni has devoted much of his of available time to running an internet resource site for bizarrists and storytelling magicians called Dragonskull.

It has become THE most respected and informative site for those magicians word-wide that are attracted to this type of performance. Karl invites all readers to look in at: www.dragonskull.co.uk