

How to Pose as a Strongman

by E. Barton-Wright
Introduction and
Commentary by Harry Cook

"Ladies and gentlemen, before I set out to join this charming assembly, I charged myself with electricity I am a human battery, I have magnetic powers which none can resist"

Pearsons Magazine, 1899

INTRODUCTION

It may seem strange to include an article about tricks of leverage in the context of the martial arts, but Barton-Wright's article is of great interest as it sheds light on similar tricks performed today by martial artists who claim to possess mysterious powers, or be able to control unusual forms of energy.

Practitioners of the Japanese art of aikido and related system often claim that they utilise the power of *ki* when they throw or otherwise deal with an opponent. Similar claims are often made by practitioners of various Chinese martial arts, who use the term *ch'i* for this mysterious energy.

Ch'i, according to Wing-Tsit Chan in *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy*, "denotes the psychophysiological power associated with blood and breath". As such it is translated as "vital force" or "vital power" and in the case of *hao-jeh chih ch'i* as "strong, moving power."

It is obvious from this and similar definitions that when martial artists talk about using *ki* or *ch'i*, they are not referring to the simple use of strength produced by muscular contraction or to the effects of skilful techniques produced by long practice. As far as believers are concerned, what they are dealing with is a form of cosmic energy that they can direct through their limbs like water through a hose. For some writers even this is not enough. Jay Gluck wrote about the founder of aikido, Morihei Uyeshiba in his work, *Zen Combat*, published in 1962. Gluck filmed Uyeshiba defending himself against a mass attack. According to Gluck, "Uyeshiba was, in effect, moving in a different time continuum." So, according to Gluck, by manipulating his *ki*, Uyeshiba could alter the fundamental laws of the universe!

Many of the types of stunts used by practitioners of Aikido to "prove" the existence of *ki* were first shown in Koichi Tohei's book, *Aikido — The Art of Self Defense*, published in Tokyo in 1961, which featured photographs of Tohei demonstrating that by using his *ki* he could prevent his arm from being bent, or his body being lifted from the floor (see Barton-Wright's demonstration and explanation of the same stunt in Trick Number 5). So does *ki* exist? If it does, then the kind of "proof" usually offered is non-conclusive. In 1889 Barton-Wright showed how the simple application of known physical laws could produce the same results, something which is usually ignored by proponents of the mysterious.

— Harry Cook

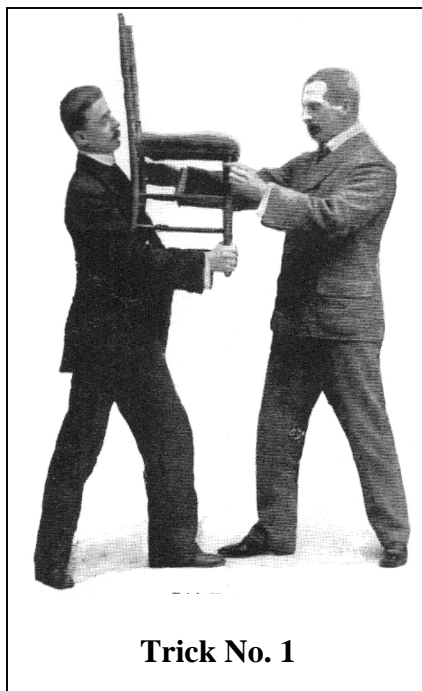
**From Pearsons Magazine,
January-June, 1899**

It must not be supposed that it is necessary to possess unusual strength to pose as a strong man: and, in many strong men's feats, strength plays a less important part than knack or trickery. There are of course many strong men, on the genuineness of whose feats of strength no shadow of suspicion has fallen. And yet I can show you a dozen feats which you yourself can perform quite successfully, providing that you possess average strength. When once you have grasped the methods of these apparent feats of strength, I will guarantee that you will be able to deceive an ordinary audience, and that you can cause any amount of amusement to yourself and your friends by private performances where critics are not severe.

Although some of the tricks described in the following pages may be familiar to you, I think I may safely say that they have never hitherto been gathered together and thoroughly explained. Some attracted great notoriety when first produced several years ago by a clever personage, styling herself "The Magnetic Lady". The world was fairly taken in by the Magnetic Lady. She did not claim that her feats were feats of strength - as, indeed, they were not. She declared that it was solely owing to the fact that she possessed remarkable magnetic and

electric powers that she was able to perform them. This, of course, was not the case, for anyone with average strength, who follows instructions, can carry them through successfully.

**How to Master A Man
with Two Fingers**



Trick No. 1

This first trick is as simple as it is effective. The situation, as in all the following cases, is best explained by the photograph. You ask any person from the audience - the stronger the man the more striking will appear the feat - to hold a chair in his arms, in such a way that the back legs rest against his chest, and he grasps the tips of the front legs, one in each hand. You then declare that with two fingers alone you can push him anywhere you please; you say that he will be able to offer you no resistance, that he is absolutely at your mercy, as indeed,

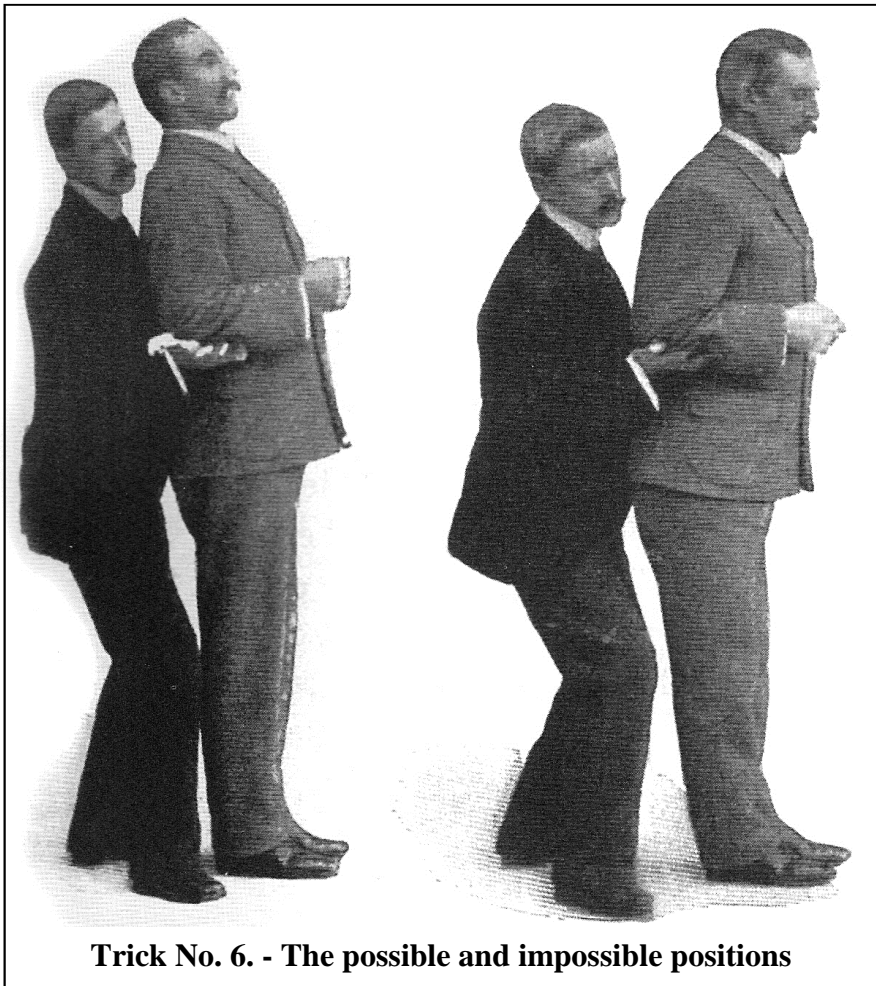
is the case.

Stand in front of him, place two fingers, one on a back leg and one on the opposite front leg as close under the seat as possible. In this position, you can sway him backwards and forwards, you can push him from side to side, you can drive him into any corner of the room, you can pull him suddenly forwards or you can throw him backward so that he falls about in the most hopeless manner imaginable.

The explanation is that you continually pull or push your opponent off his balance, owing to the leverage obtained by the peculiar position in which he is made to hold the chair. By watching his face you can see whether he is prepared to resist a pull forwards, or a push backwards. If the former is the case, you push him backwards, if the latter, you pull forward. You thus always take him unawares.

**How to Defy Anyone
Standing In Front of you to
Lift You From the Ground
[Trick No. 5]**

"Ladies and gentlemen, before I set out to join this charming assembly, I charged myself with electricity. I am a human battery, I have magnetic powers which none can resist. With your permission I will give you a few proofs of the marvellous qualities I possess..." With some such preamble as this



Trick No. 6. - The possible and impossible positions

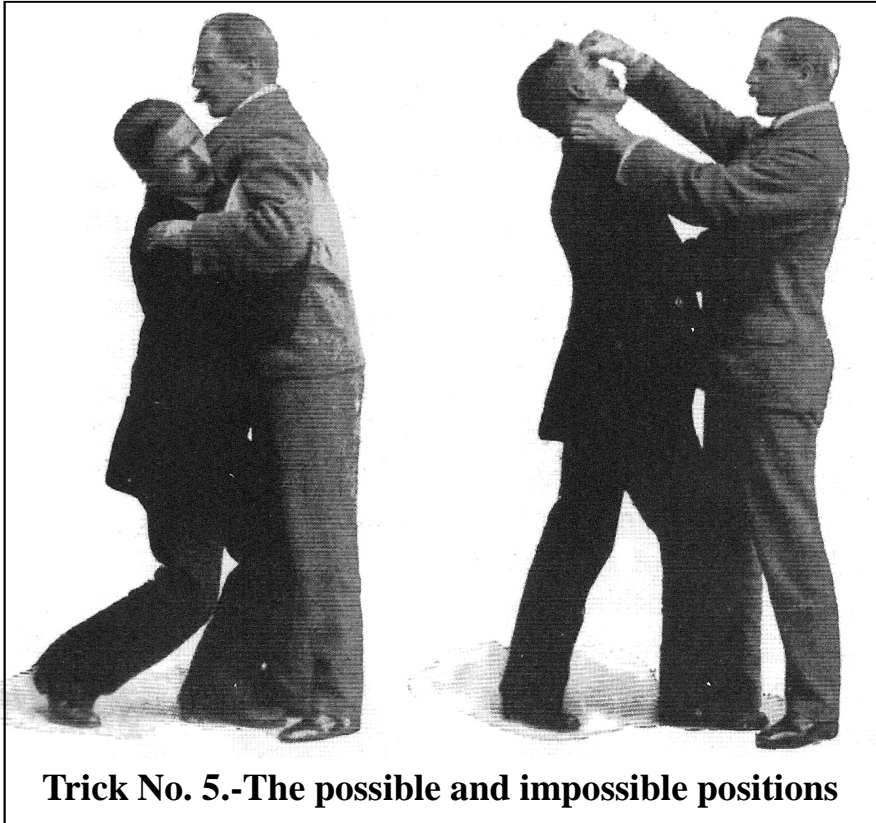
of showing how easy the feat is when your permission is given and when silk handkerchiefs are used as non-conductors of your electric powers. Your opponent will easily raise you provided that you stiffen your body and arms, and incline your body slightly backwards, so as to throw your weight upon him. But when you defy him to lift you, take away the handkerchiefs to allow the electricity to come into play, stand as limply as possible, with head and body slightly bent forward, and hold your arms loosely. It will then be practically impossible for him or anyone else, grasping you by the elbows, to raise you in the air.

How to Face a Wall, With Your Arms Outstretched, and Defy any Number of Strong Men to Push You Against It [Trick No. 8]

Take up a position against a wall, as shown in the photograph on the following page. Be careful, however, to resist the power from behind entirely with your wrists, for if you attempt to resist with your hands only, they would be bent back, and your wrists, in all probability, would receive a severe strain. The object of the people

pressing behind you is to push you against the wall; your objective is not so much to resist them, as to break their line, a very simple matter as I shall show, if you know how.

Arrange, if possible, to have a weak man pressing immediately on your shoulder blades. Place two silk handkerchiefs, which are very slippery, upon your shoulders, saying that you take this precaution in order that your coat shall not be soiled. Then, when the word is given, and every one begins to push with all their power, it is not at all improbable that the weak man will give way before you feel any severe strain: and the line will naturally fall to pieces. However, if this does not happen, slightly bend one of your arms (the one furthest from the audience so that they sure not see how the trick is done), and lower your shoulder causing the hand of the man pressing behind you to slip off. Those pushing behind will lose their balance, and the line will immediately be broken. You then straighten your bent arm and assume the original position. In order to make this trick more effective. You ask two members of the audience to place their hands between yours and the wall then, when the trick is done, ask them whether they felt any pressure. *They* will reply in the negative. The reason is, of course, that you receive the whole pressure on your wrists.



Trick No. 5.-The possible and impossible positions

the following trick may be made *very* effective. The good conjurer and wonder-worker talks all the while when performing, and so succeeds in distracting the notice of his audience from his fraudulent methods. The idea of "magnetic powers" will serve as an excellent patter when performing this feat. You declare that when you call your magnetic virtues into play you can defy anyone to lift you from the ground. First, however, you show with what ease another person may lift you when you allow these magnetic powers to slumber. In order to render it easy for anyone to raise you into the air, face your opponent, place your hands on his shoulders and lean well forward, having previously covered his hands with silk handkerchiefs, which,

you declare, act as non conductors. He then bends his knees, places his hands beneath your arm-pits, and then gradually and easily raises you from the ground, not, however, by strength of arm, but merely by exerting leg power. Now to show how you can render it impossible for anyone to lift you when, as you tell your audience, you turn on your electric current!

Remove the two non conductors, place one finger on your opponent's temple, and another on the extremely sensitive tonsil gland of his throat, explaining, meanwhile, that it is only by so doing that you are able to complete the electric circuit. Throw your body and your head slightly backwards. Then, when the man attempts to lift you, he will in-

voluntarily draw away from you as he feels the pain from the pressure of your finger on his tonsil, the result being that his arms are almost straightened.

Now, when your opponent is in this awkward position, it is obviously impossible for him to raise your body. Sandow, the strongest man in the world, is only able to hold out about 75 pounds at this particular attitude, although he can handle lift 500 lbs with one finger, and about two tons off the ground by what is known as the "saddle lift".

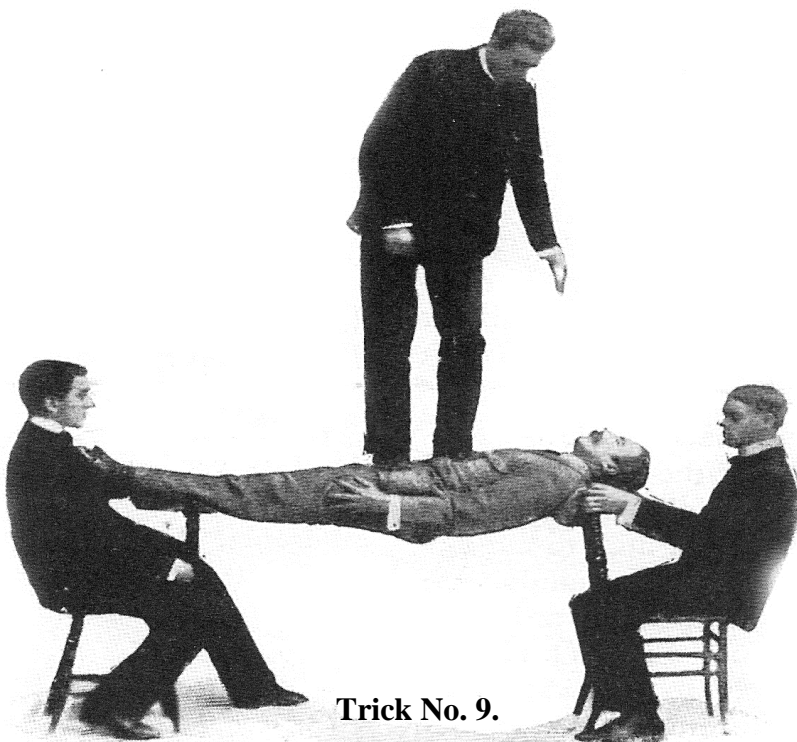
You must make the audience imagine, however, that you have rendered your opponent helpless solely by the exercise of your marvelous electrical power, and if you are a good talker, you should be able to readily deceive them as to your real methods. Remember, however, to keep your opponent away from you only just sufficiently to answer your purpose in preventing him from lifting you, otherwise it is likely to attract attention, and show people how the trick is done.

**How to Defy Anyone
Standing Behind You
to Lift You from
the Ground [Trick No. 6]**

This trick is a variation of No. 5, but is equally effective. As before, you talk a great deal about your "magnetic powers" and allow yourself first to be lifted in the air, by way



Trick No. 8.



Trick No. 9.

I advise only the stronger section of my readers to attempt this feat; it is not a case of trickery so much as a case of strength, although less strength is required than any one would imagine who first witnesses the performance.

Place two chairs in such positions that, when you are lying horizontally, the back of one will support your shoulders and the back of the other your feet. Then ask your friends to tie your arms tightly to your sides, a device which gives invaluable sup-

port. On the top of the chair on which your shoulders will rest place a thick overcoat, doubled twice. This, it will be found, will extend the support not only down your back but up your legs. It will, in fact, have much the same effect as would a flat board.

Lie at length on the ground, and request two people to take you up, one by the legs, and the other by the head, and to place you on the chairs. Arrange for someone to step upon your chest from a chair at a given signal. Then, when everything is ready, draw a long breath, give the signal, and when the ordeal is over try to assume as pleasant a look as possible.

Commentary

1. Unfortunately Barton-Wright does not tell us which specific magnetic lady he is referring to. Several musical hall performers used that name in acts which featured the apparent use of magnetism or some strange form of energy derived from electricity. The original magnetic lady was Lulu Hearst, born in 1869 in Cedartown, Tennessee, USA. She became famous for her ability to resist the push of one or more men combined with her ability to fling them around the stage like rag dolls. She could apparently control her body weight, performing one test for Alexander Graham Bell when she stood on a pair of scales while lifting a heavy man sitting in a chair.

The scales are said to have registered the weight of the man plus the chair, but not her own weight.

The great magician and illusionist Harry Houdini (1874-1926) has the following to say about "The Magnetic Lady" in his *Miracle Monkeys and Their Methods* published in 1920. "Lulu Hurst known variously as the Georgia Magnet, The Electric Girl, the Georgia Wonder, etc., created a veritable sensation a generation ago by a series of feats which seemed to set the law of gravitation at defiance. Her methods consisted of utilising the principles of the lever and fulcrum in a manner so cleverly disguised that it appeared to the audience that some supernatural power must be at work. Although she was exposed many times, her success was so marked that several other muscular ladies entered her province with acts that were, in several instances, superior to the original.

"One of the cleverest of these was Annie Abbott, who, if I remember rightly, also called herself the Georgia Magnet. She took the act to England and her opening performance at the Alhambra is recorded as one of the three big sensations of the London vaudeville stage of those years."

While many people were impressed by the Magnetic Lady and all the hocus-pocus that surrounded her act, not everybody was tak-

en in. During a performance in New York she attempted to use her "power" on a strongly built individual named Thomas Johnson, an engraver who worked for the *Century* magazine. He had some knowledge of her methods which caused her to fail in many of her stunts. The *New York Times* of 13 July 1884 reported: "the phenomenon of the 19th century which may be seen nightly at Wallacks is not so much the famous Georgia girl, with her mysterious muscle, as it is the audience which gathers to wonder at her performance. It is a phenomenon of stupidity, and it only goes to show how willingly people will be fooled, and with what cheerful asininity they will help their deceivers."

As the great showman Phineas T. Barnum observed, "There's a sucker born every minute". Some people simply need mysteries so they chose to ignore The Magnetic Lady's failures. Similar stunts performed today by various martial artists are often cited as evidence of mysterious cosmic energies, or life forces: the "phenomenon of stupidity" has not yet disappeared.

2 The efficient use of strength is one of the cornerstones of modern judo. The founder of Judo, Jigoro Kano, explain this idea in his *Judo* (Jujutsu) published in Tokyo in 1937: "When a contestant is pushed by an op-

ponent in random practice, he should pull the opponent more than he is pushed without losing his own balance; also, when he is pulled by his opponent he should push the opponent more than he's pulled without losing his own balance. In this way he can break the opponent's posture or balance and thus make his attack against the opponent easier".

Many of these stunts are shown in Koichi Tohei's works, *Aikido The Art of Self Defense* (1961) and *Ki in Daily Life* (1978), where they are used as examples of the mind controlling the body by directing the flow of ki.

Perhaps the most graphic descriptions of ki and its uses is to be found in Jay Gluck's book, *Zen Combat*, published in 1962. Gluck is an avid proponent of this mysterious energy. When he describes the aikido version of Barton-Wright's trick No. 9, he tells us: "One clue that this strength is probably present in every one is that ordinary people under hypnosis are also capable of great feats of strength. The most common and most sensational is the suspension of a hypnotised person across two chairs, supported at his head and heels, while several persons stand on his mid-section. The aiki master claims that any aiki man can do this, and I have suspended myself across two chairs, though admittedly I cannot support much over one hundred pounds extra weight. But while the hypnotic is in a

trance and under the suggestive control of an outsider, the aikiist is fully awake and in complete control of himself".

Once this energy is mastered then the individual becomes truly formidable. Gluck describes various attempts to subdue Tohei by the use of physical strength: "Korin Turley of the 545 Military Police Company, United States Army, Japan, learned just how concentrated Tohei can project his aiki strength. Tohei, completely relaxed and even laughing, held Turley back with his upraised little finger, though Turley pushed against it with all his power. Then Jack Bogan backed up Arthur H. St. Cyr backing up Korin Turley as almost 700 lbs. of fighting muscle of United States military policemen got nowhere against the up placed pinky of aiki instructor Tohei. Finally, they all rapidly advanced backwards to a sitting position at the flick of Tohei's pinky. All the men tried this several times and vouch that Tohei touched them only with his little finger which was always vertical. Never once did he use another finger or even allow the base of the little finger to touch them.

"Master Tohei sat on the padded rush mats, balanced on his rump, feet lifted from contact with the floor, and invited Jack Rogan to try and tip him over by pushing against his head or shoulders. Even when Jack got the knack of keeping his feet from slipping backwards on

the mats, he couldn't budge Tohei. 'He's immovable', he admitted. So Korin Turley lent a hand pushing Jack who was pushing Tohei. The two got nowhere together until Tohei demonstrated his total control over the situation, and flicked them off. Tohei felt he had an unfair advantage over the Yanks being used to sitting on the floor as the Japanese do in their homes. So he sat on a wobbly four-legged stool that has never seen but three legs at a time touch the floor, lifted his feet off the floor and invited the MPs to push - again to no avail

A fantastic performance, only bettered by the founder of aikido Morihei Uyeshiba who, according to Gluck, could block arrows fired at point blank range, and avoid bullets fired at him by an expert pistol shot.

Sadly the reality does not confirm Gluck's glowing account. In 1958 Tohei was filmed trying to apply aikido techniques in a free situation on an American journalist. Tohei was an 8th dan in aikido and a 5th dan in Judo at the time. The journalist who had never studied any martial arts was taller and heavier than Tohei, but was not in good physical condition. It was agreed that punches would not be used, which should have provided the perfect situation to demonstrate the use of ki. The film clearly shows the journalist grabbing Tohei by the arms and jacket and pulling him to the ground, at one

point his *hakama* (the traditional clothing of a senior martial artists) is ripped as he tries to escape the American's clutches. The American rapidly became tired and then Tohei moved in and choked him into partial unconsciousness with a Judo strangle. At no time was Tohei able to use the flowing throws or locks of the type normally featured in aikido demonstrations. For a man reputedly able to hold back 700 lbs. of trained muscle with his little finger, it was a lamentable performance. The supernormal feats described by Jay Gluck could not be repeated when the situation was uncontrolled, and the tremendous power of ki failed to materialise.

Harry Cook is a high graded karate instructor of international repute, a martial arts historian and author of numerous magazine articles and books.