

A bare hook, its sharp barb glistening, levitates in the water. Waiting in silence, a man sits cross-legged holding a fishing pole. He scans the water, his eyes searching diligently around the sides of the bowl, slowly circling inward until his focus is fixed upon the shining barb. Carefully reposing on the edge of existence lest he fall into the watery chaos, the man empties his mind and enters the still point.

A shadow suddenly covers the bowl. The angler glances up at the figure causing the disturbance. A San Francisco police officer, poised and puzzled, looks first at the bowl and then at the man seated on the sidewalk.

“What are you doing?” he inquires.

The man smiles and answers, “I’m fishing.”

Now uncertain, wondering if he has a crazy to deal with, the officer remarks, “Your hook is empty and so is the bowl. How do you expect to catch any fish?”

The angler points up to his brown felt hat with assorted plugs and flies attached and replies, “Because I’m wearing my fishing hat.”

The policeman is no longer happy, and a sternness builds deep within him. “You’re blocking traffic. This is a busy intersection. Get your stuff together and leave. Now.”

The fisher reels in the line, and when the hook comes out of the bowl, a goldfish is attached. Standing up, he retrieves from his jacket pocket a small plastic container filled with water. He removes its cover and, after placing the fish into the water, closes the container. He looks at the goldfish peering at him. Smiling, he speaks to it, “Thanks for being here.” He puts the container back into his pocket and directs his attention to the officer.

Shocked and feeling deceived, the police officer asks for the angler’s ID. Reaching into the air, the man plucks a wallet from nowhere. Opening it, he retrieves a business card and gives it to the perplexed officer, who reads the printed inscription: “Ralph Garland, magician for all occasions.” Gruffly, the policeman demands the magician’s driver license.

Inspecting Garland’s ID, the officer asks, “Do you have a fishing license?”

“No, I don’t. I didn’t think I needed one to stage a magical performance.”

“What about a permit for your show?”

“Sorry, no permit either.”

Then in an angry mood the officer proceeds to write out a citation for fishing without a license, and while he is occupied, the magician empties the bowl, and then puts it into a cloth shoulder bag along with the collapsed rod. When the officer has finished, the magician takes the citation in his right hand and waves his left hand over it. To the astonishment of the officer the citation has vanished.

Applause and cheers break loose from the crowd of people who have gathered to watch the affair. Bowing to his admiring audience, the mage smiles into the TV camera of Channel 7 News and then, snatching his shoulder bag as a cable car enters the turnaround at the junction of Market and Powell Streets and clangs its bell, quickly disappears down the stairs to the Muni underground, leaving an incensed police officer in his wake.

Hermes Beckons by John Caris © 2006
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