

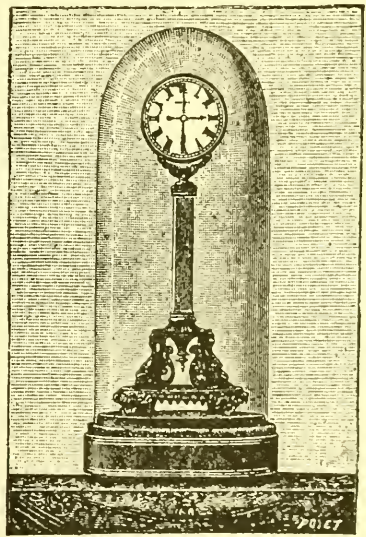
ROBERT-HOUDIN.

CONJUROR, AUTHOR, AND AMBASSADOR.

BY HENRY RIDGELY EVANS.

I.

ON a certain day in the year 1843, the Count de l'Escalopier, a scion of the *old régime* of France, and a great lover of curios, was strolling along an unpretentious street of the Marais Quarter, of Paris. He stopped to look at some mechanical toys displayed in the window of a dark little shop, over the door of which was painted the following modest sign: "M. Robert-Houdin, Pendules de Précision." This sign noted the fact that the proprietor was a watchmaker, and that his wares were distinguished for precise running. What particularly attracted the nobleman's attention was a peculiar looking clock of clearest crystal that ran apparently without works, the invention of M. Robert-Houdin. The Count, who was a great lover of *science amusante*, or science wedded to recreation, purchased the magic clock, and better than that made the acquaintance of the inventor, the obscure watchmaker, who was



HOUDIN'S MAGIC CLOCK.¹

¹ The cut represents the magic clock invented by Robert-Houdin about sixty years ago. This very remarkable time-piece consists of a dial composed of two juxtaposed disks of glass, one of which is stationary and carries the hours, while the other is movable and serves for the motion of the hands. This latter disk is provided with a wheel or rather a toothed ring concealed within the metallic ring forming a dial. The glass column which constitutes the body of

destined to become the greatest of prestidigitateurs, an author and ambassador. The Count became a frequent visitor to Houdin's shop, to watch the construction of various automata. Houdin often showed slight-of-hand tricks for the amusement of his patron, and confessed his desire to become a public performer. The Count urged him continually to abandon the watchmaking and mechanical-toy trade and go on the stage as a prestidigitateur. Finally Houdin confessed his inability to do so, owing to lack of means, whereupon the kind-hearted nobleman exclaimed: "*Mon cher ami*, I have at home, at this very moment, ten thousand francs or so, which I really don't know what to do with. Do me the favor to borrow them for an indefinite period: you will be doing me an actual service."

But Houdin would not accept the offer, for he was loth to risk a friend's money in a theatrical speculation. The Count in a state of pique left the shop and did not return for many days. Then he rushed excitedly into the workroom, sank upon a chair, and exclaimed:

"My dear neighbor, since you are determined not to accept a favor from me, I have now come to beg one of you. This is the state of the case. For the last year my desk has been robbed from time to time of very considerable sums of money. I have adopted all possible safeguards and precautions,—having the place watched, changing the locks, secret fastenings to the door, etc.,—but none of these has foiled the villainous ingenuity of the thief. This very morning I have discovered that a couple of thousand-franc notes have disappeared."

The upshot of it all was that Houdin invented a clever device for apprehending the criminal. It consisted of an apparatus fastened to the inside of the desk in the Count's house. When the desk was unlocked, and the lid raised ever so little, a pistol was discharged; at the same time a clawlike arrangement, attached to a light rod and impelled by a spring, came sharply down on the back of the hand which held the key, inflicting a superficial flesh-

the piece is formed of two tubes which operate according to the principle of the dial, that is to say, one is stationary and the other movable. To each of the extremities of the latter is fixed a wheel. These wheels gear with transmission pinions which communicate, one of them at the top with the movable plate of glass of the dial, and the other at the bottom with the movement placed in the wooden base which supports the glass shade covering the clock. All these concealed transmissions are arranged in a most skilful manner, and complete the illusion. The movable glass of the dial, carried along by the column, actuates a small dial-train mounted in the thickness of the stationary glass, and within an extremely narrow space in the center of the dial. It is covered by the small hand and is consequently invisible. The hands are very easily actuated by it on account of their extreme lightness and perfect equilibrium."—*Scientific American, N. Y.*

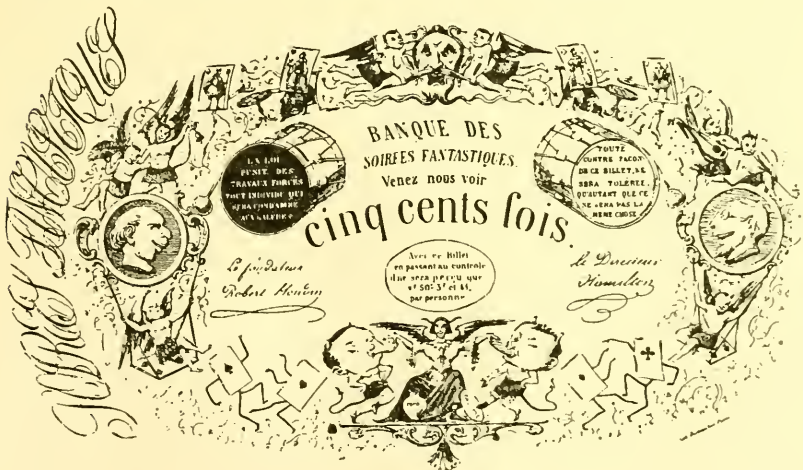
wound. With this clever machine the robber was successfully caught. He proved to be the Count's valet,—a trusted employée. The nobleman forced the thief to disgorge over fifteen thousand francs, which he had invested in government stock.

M. de l'Escalopier took the money thus recovered to Houdin, saying: "Take it, return it to me just when you like, with the understanding that it is to be repaid only out of the profits of your theater."

With this money, Houdin built a little theater in the Palais Royal. One day the following handbill appeared on the theatrical bulletin-boards :

"Aujourd'hui Jeudi, 3 Juillet 1845.
 Première Représentation
 des
 SOIRÉES FANTASTIQUES
 de
 ROBERT-HOUDAIN."

"On this day," says Houdin, "by a strange coincidence, the Hippodrome and the "Fantastic Soirées" of Robert-Houdin, the



LITHOGRAPHED INVITATION-TICKET DESIGNED BY HOUDIN.

(The signatures are those of Houdin and his son-in-law, Hamilton.)

largest and smallest stage in Paris, were opened to the public. The 3d of July, 1845, saw two bills placarded on the walls of Paris; one enormous belonging to the Hippodrome, while the other, of far more modest proportions, announced my performances. Still,

as in the fable of the reed and the oak, the large theatre, in spite of the skill of the managers, has undergone many changes of fortune; while the smaller one has continually enjoyed the public favor. I have sacredly kept a proof of my first bill, the form and color of which has always remained the same since that date. I copy it word for word here, both to furnish an idea of its simplicity, and to display the programme of the experiments I then offered to the public:

TO-DAY, THURSDAY, JULY 3, 1845.

FIRST REPRESENTATION

OF

THE FANTASTIC SOIRÉES

OF

ROBERT-HOUDIN.

AUTOMATA, SLEIGHT-OF-HAND, MAGIC.

The Performance will be composed of entirely novel Experiments
invented by M. ROBERT-HOUDIN.

AMONG THEM BEING:

THE CABALISTIC CLOCK.

AURIOL AND DEBUREAU.

THE ORANGE-TREE.

THE MYSTERIOUS BOUQUET.

THE HANDKERCHIEF.

PIERROT IN THE EGG.

OBEDIENT CARDS.

THE MIRACULOUS FISH.

THE FASCINATING OWL.

THE PASTRYCOOK OF THE PALAIS
ROYAL.

TO COMMENCE AT EIGHT O'CLOCK.

Box-office open at Half-past Seven.

Price of places: Upper Boxes, 1 fr. 50 c.; Stalls, 3 fr.; Boxes,
4 fr.; Dress Circle, 5 fr.

These fantastic evenings soon became popular. The little theater would only seat two hundred people, but the prices of ad-

mission were rather high. When the Revolution of 1848 ruined the majority of Parisian theater managers, Houdin simply looked the door of his hall, and retired to his little workshop to invent new tricks and automata. His loss was very slight, for he was under no great expense. When order was restored, he resumed the *soirées magique*. The newspapers rallied to his assistance and made playful allusions to his being related to the family of *Robert le Diable*. The leading illustrated journals sent artists to draw pictures of his stage. Houdin found time, amid all his labors, to edit a little paper which he called *Cagliostro*, full of *bon mots* and pleasantries, to say nothing of cartoons. Copies of this *petit journal pour rire* were distributed among the spectators at each performance.

As each theatrical season opened, Houdin had some new marvel to present to his audiences. His maxims were: "It is more difficult to support admiration than to excite it." "The fashion an artist enjoys can only last as long as his talent daily increases." Houdin had but few, if any, rivals in his day. His tricks were all new, or so improved as to appear new. He swept everything before him. When he went to London for a prolonged engagement, Anderson, the "Wizard of the North," who was a great favorite with the public, retired into the Provinces with his antique repertoire. What had the English conjurer to offer alongside of such unique novelties as the *Second Sight*, *Aerial Suspension*, *Inexhaustible Bottle*, *Mysterious Portfolio*, *Crystal Cash Box*, *Shower of Gold*, *Light and Heavy Chest*, *Orange Tree*, *the Crystal Clock*, and the automaton figures *Auriol and Deburcau*, *the Pastry Cook of the Palais Royal*, etc., etc.

II.

Jean-Eugène Robert (Houdin) was born in the quaint old city of Blois, the birth-place of Louis XII. and of Papin, the inventor of the steam engine, on December 6, 1805. Napoleon was at the zenith of his fame, and had just fought the bloody battle of Austerlitz.

Luckily for the subject of this sketch, he was born too late to serve as food for powder. He lived to grow to man's estate and honorable old age, and became the veritable Napoleon of Necromancy. His career makes fascinating reading. Houdin's father was a watchmaker, and from him he inherited his remarkable mechanical genius. At the age of eleven, Jean-Eugène was sent to college at Orleans. On the completion of his studies, he entered

a notary's office at Blois, but spent most of his time inventing little mechanical toys and devices, instead of engrossing dusty parchment, so the notary advised him to abandon the idea of becoming a lawyer and take up a mechanical trade. Houdin joyfully took up his father's occupation of watchmaking, for which he had a decided bent. One evening the young apprentice went to a bookseller's shop in Blois and asked for a work on horology by Berthoud. The shopman by mistake handed him a couple of odd volumes of the *Encyclopédie*, which somewhat resembled Berthoud's book. Jean-Eugène went home to his attic, lit a candle, and prepared to devote an evening to hard study, but judge of his surprise to find that the supposed treatise on watchmaking was a work on natural magic and prestidigitation, under the head of scientific amusements. He was delighted at the revelations contained in the mystic volume, which told how to perform tricks with the cards, to cut off a pigeon's head and restore it again, etc., etc. Here was an introduction to the New Arabian Nights of enchantment. He slept with the book under his pillow, and possibly dreamed of African wizards, genii, and all sorts of incantations. This little incident brought about great changes in Houdin's life. He secretly vowed to become a prestidigitateur,—a rôle for which he was eminently fitted, psychologically and physically. The principles of sleight-of-hand Houdin had to create for himself, for the mystic volume, though it revealed the secrets of the tricks, gave the neophyte no adequate idea of the subtle passes and misdirection required to properly execute them.

Though an ardent devotee of legerdemain, Houdin did not neglect his trade of watchmaker. When his apprenticeship was over, he went to Tours as a journeyman, in the shop of M. Noriet, who afterwards became a noted sculptor. While in the employ of M. Noriet, Houdin was poisoned by eating a ragout cooked in a stew pan in which there chanced to be verdigris. He was very ill, and his life was saved with difficulty. Possessed with the idea that he was soon to die, he escaped one day from his nurse and doctor and set out for Blois to bid adieu to his family before he departed from this sublunary sphere. A most singular adventure befell him, which reads like a romance. Those who believe in Destiny have here a curious example of its strange workings. The jolting of the lumbering old diligence gave Houdin great pain. He was burning with fever and delirious. Without any one knowing it, he opened the door of the rotonde, in which he happened to be the only passenger, and leaped out on the high road, where he lay unconscious.

When he recovered his senses, he found himself lying in a comfortable bed. An unknown man with a phial of medicine in his hand bent over him. By the strangest luck, Houdin had fallen into the hands of a travelling conjurer named Torrini, who went about the country in a sort of house on wheels, which was drawn by a pair of big Norman horses. Torrini early in life had been a physician and was able to tend his patient with intelligence and skill. Finding the young watchmaker a clever mechanician, Torrini gave him some magical automata to repair, and Houdin was introduced for the first time to the little Harlequin that jumps out of a box and performs various feats at the mandate of the conjurer. A delightful friendship began between the watchmaker and the wizard. Torrini, who was an expert with cards, initiated Houdin into the secrets of many clever feats performed with the pasteboards. He also corrected his pupil's numerous mistakes in legerdemain, into which all self-educated amateurs fall. It was a fascinating life led in this conjurer's caravan. Besides Torrini and Houdin there was Antonio, the assistant, and man of all work. Torrini related many amusing adventures to his young pupil, which the latter has recorded in his admirable autobiography. It was he who under the name of the Comte de Grisy performed the famous watch trick before Pius VII. and had so unique revenge upon the Chevalier Pinetti.

Torrini's son was accidentally shot by a spectator in the gun trick during a performance at Strasburgh. A real leaden bullet got among the sham bullets and was loaded into the weapon. Overcome with grief at the loss of his only child and at the subsequent death of his wife, he abandoned the great cities and wandered about the French Provinces attended by his faithful assistant and brother-in-law, Antonio. But to return to Robert-Houdin.

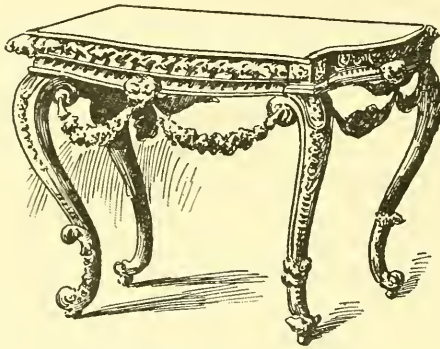
One day at Abusson the conjurer's caravan collided with an enormous hay cart. Houdin and Antonio escaped with light contusions, but the Master had a leg broken and an arm dislocated. The two horses were killed; as for the carriage, only the body remained intact; all the rest was smashed to atoms. During Torrini's illness, Houdin, assisted by Antonio, gave a conjuring performance at the town hall to replete the exchequer. Houdin succeeded very well in his first attempt, with the exception that he ruined a gentleman's chapeau while performing the trick of the omelet in the hat.

Soon after this Houdin bid adieu to Torrini and returned to his parents at Blois. He never saw Torrini again in this life. After following watchmaking at Blois for quite a little while, he

proceeded to Paris, with his wife,—for he had not only taken unto himself a spouse, but had adopted her name, Houdin, as part of his own cognomen. He was now Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, master-watchmaker. His *recontre* with the Count de l'Escalopier and the result have already been given.

Houdin completely revolutionised the art of conjuring. Prior to his time, the tables used by magicians were little else than huge confederate boxes. Conjuring under such circumstances was child's play, as compared with the difficulties to be encountered with the apparatus of the new school. In addition, Houdin discarded the long, flowing robes of many of his predecessors, and appeared in evening dress. Since his time all first-class prestidigitateurs have followed his example, both as to dress and tables.

Houdin's center-table was a marvel of mechanical skill and ingenuity. Concealed in the body were "vertical rods, each ar-



HOUDIN'S TRICK-TABLE.

anged to rise and fall in a tube, according as it was drawn down by a spiral spring or pulled up by a whip-cord which passed over a pulley at the top of the tube and so down the table-leg to the hiding-place of the confederate." There were "ten of these pistons, and ten cords passing under the floor of the stage, terminated at a key-

board. Various ingenious automata were actuated by this means of transmitting motion."

Houdin's stage was very handsome. It was a replica in miniature of a salon of the Louis XV. period—all in white and gold—illuminated by elegant candelabra and a chandelier. The magic table occupied the center of the room. This piece of furniture was flanked by little *guéridons*. At the sides were consoles, with about five inches of gold fringe hanging from them, and across the back of the apartment ran a broad shelf, upon which was displayed the various apparatus to be used in the *séances*. "The consoles were nothing more than shallow wooden boxes with openings through the side-scenes. The tops of the consoles were perforated with traps. Any object which the wizard desired to work off secretly to his confederate behind the scenes was placed on one of these traps

and covered with a sheet of paper, pasteboard cover or a handkerchief. Touching a spring caused the article to fall noiselessly through the trap upon cotton batting, and roll into the hand of the conjurer's concealed assistant."

Now for a few of the tricks of this classic prestidigitator. His greatest invention was the "light and heavy chest." Speaking of this remarkable experiment he wrote: "I do not think, modesty apart, that I ever invented anything so daringly ingenious." The magician came forward with a little wooden box, to the top of which was attached a metal handle. He addressed the audience as follows: "Ladies and gentlemen, I have a cash-box which possesses some strange properties. It becomes heavy or light at will. I place in it some banknotes for safekeeping and deposit it here on the 'run-down' in sight of all. Will some gentleman test the lightness of the box?"

When the volunteer had satisfied the audience that the box could be lifted with the little finger, Houdin executed some pretended mesmeric passes over it, and bade the gentleman lift it a second time. But try as he might, the volunteer would prove unequal to the task. At a sign from Houdin the box would be restored to its pristine lightness. This trick was performed with a powerful electro-magnet with conducting wires reaching behind the scenes to a battery. At a signal from the performer an operator turned on the electric current, and the box, which had an iron plate let into its bottom, covered with mahogany-colored paper, clung to the magnet with supernatural attraction. In the year 1845, the phenomena of electro-magnetism were unknown to the general public, hence the trick of the spirit cash-box created the most extraordinary sensation. When the subject of electricity became better known, Houdin made an addition to the trick which threw his spectators off the scent. After first having shown the trick on the "run-down," he hooked the box to one end of a cord which passed over a pulley attached to the ceiling of the hall. A spectator was requested to take hold of the other end of the cord and keep the chest suspended.

"Just at present," remarked the conjurer, "the chest is extremely light; but as it is about to become, at my command, very heavy, I must ask five or six other persons to help this gentleman, for fear the chest should lift him off his feet."

"No sooner was this done than the chest came heavily to the ground, dragging along and sometimes lifting off their feet all the spectators who were holding the cord. The explanation is this:

On a casual inspection of the pulley and block everything appears to indicate that, as usual in such cases, the cord passes straight over the pulley, in on one side and out on the other; but such is not really the fact, as will be seen upon tracing the course of the dotted lines (Fig. 1), which, passing through the block and through the ceiling, are attached on either side to a double pulley fixed in the room above. To any one who has the most elementary acquaintance with the laws of mechanics, it will be obvious that the strength of the person who holds the handle of the windlass above is multiplied tenfold, and that he can easily overcome even the combined resistance of five or six spectators."

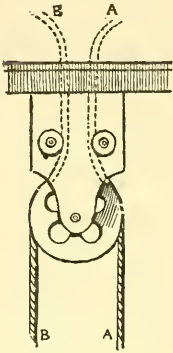


Fig. 1.

The "bust of Socrates" was another favorite experiment with Houdin. In this illusion a living bust with the features of Socrates was suspended in the middle of the stage without visible support. The performer, habited as an Athenian noble, addressed questions to the mutilated philosopher and received

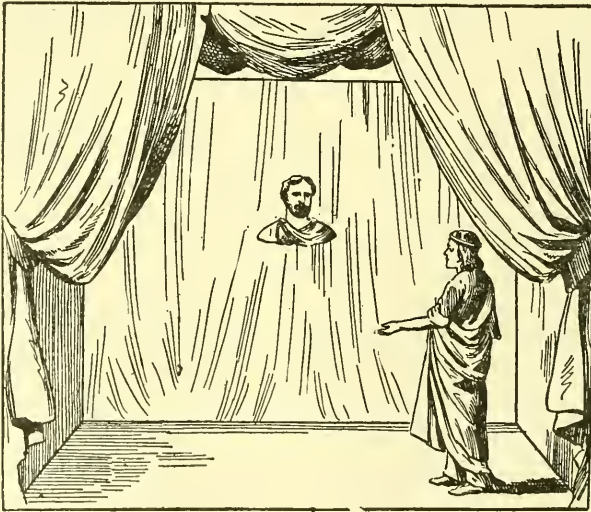


Fig. 2. THE TALKING BUST.

replies in stanzas of elegiac verse. The *mise-en-scène* is represented in Fig. 2. Houdin explains the illusion as follows :

"A, B, C, D, (Fig. 3) represent a section of the stage on which the trick is exhibited. A sheet of silvered glass, G, G, oc-

cupying the whole width of the stage, is placed in a diagonal position, extending from the upper part of the stage at the rear, down to the footlights, so as to form an angle of forty-five degrees with the floor. In the center of the glass is an opening through which the actor passes his head and shoulders, as shown in the figure. It should be further mentioned that the ceiling and the two sides of the stage are hung with wall-paper of the same pattern, and are brilliantly illuminated,

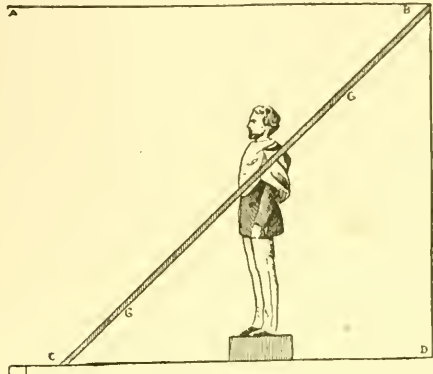


Fig. 3. HOW THE TALKING BUST WAS WORKED.

either by means of footlights at *C*, or by gas-jets placed behind the border *A*. Such being the condition of things, the effect is as follows: The ceiling *A* is reflected in the mirror, and its reflection appears to the spectators to be the paper of the wall *B, D*, which in reality is hidden by the glass.

“By means of this reflection, of which he is of course unaware, the spectator is led to believe that he sees three sides of the stage; and there being nothing to suggest to his mind the presence of the glass, he is led to believe that the bust is suspended in mid-air, and without any support.”

“Aërial Suspension” was one of Houdin’s inventions. It has been a favorite trick since his time. In the original illusion Houdin had one of his young sons, who was dressed as a page, stand on a small stool. The performer then placed a walking-stick under the extended right arm of the boy, near the elbow, and one under the left arm. First the stool was knocked away and the youthful assistant was suspended in the air, held up only by the two frail sticks, which were in themselves inadequate to support such a weight. Then the left stick was removed, but the boy did not fall. To the astonishment of every one, the youth was placed in a horizontal position. He remained in a perfectly rigid attitude with his head leaning on his arm, the top of the cane under his elbow.

This very ingenious trick was suggested to Houdin on reading stories about the alleged levitation of Hindoo fakirs. The walking-stick that supported the right arm of the assistant was of iron, painted to resemble wood. It fitted into a slot in the stage; its

top connected with a bar concealed in the sleeve of the boy. This bar formed part of a strong steel framework worn under the assistant's clothing. Thus was the page suspended in the air.

Houdin's trick of the "orange-tree" was a capital one. The tree blossomed and bore fruit at the command of the conjurer. All the oranges were distributed among the spectators except one on the topmost branch of the tree. In this orange the magician caused a handkerchief to appear, which had been previously borrowed. The handkerchief was made to vanish from the hands of the performer. "Hey, presto!" the orange fell apart in four sections, whereupon two butterflies sprang out and fluttered upward with the handkerchief. The explanation of this beautiful trick is as follows: The tree was a clever piece of mechanism, so closely fashioned to resemble a plant that it was impossible to detect the difference. The blossoms, constructed of white silk, were pushed up through the hollow branches by pistons rising in the table and operating upon similar rods contained in the tree. When these pedals were relaxed the blossoms disappeared, and the fruit was slowly developed. Real oranges were stuck on iron spikes protruding from the branches of the tree, and were concealed from the spectators by hemispherical wire screens painted green. The screens were also partly hidden by the artificial foliage. By means of cords running down through the branches of the tree and off behind the scenes, an assistant caused the screens to make a half-turn, thereby developing the fruit. The borrowed handkerchief was exchanged for a dummy belonging to the conjurer, and passed to an assistant who placed it in the mechanical orange. The tree was now brought forward. After the real fruit had been distributed, the magician called attention to the orange on the top (the mechanical one). By means of sleight-of-hand the handkerchief was made to vanish, to be discovered in the orange. The butterflies, which were fastened by wires to the stalk and fixed on delicate spiral springs, invisible at a little distance, flew out of the orange of their own accord, carrying with them the handkerchief, as soon as the fruit fell apart.

III.

In the year 1846 Houdin was summoned to the Palace of Saint-Cloud to give a performance before Louis Philippe and his Court, whereupon he invented his remarkable trick of the enchanted casket, which created great excitement in the Parisian journals, and gained him no little fame. He had six days to prepare for the

séance magique. Early on the appointed morning a van from the royal stables came to convey him and his son, together with the magic paraphernalia, to the palace of the king. A stage had been erected in one of the handsome salons of St. Cloud, the windows of which opened out on an orangery lined with double rows of orange-trees, "each growing in its square box on wheels. A sentry was placed at the door to see that the conjurer was not disturbed in his preparations. The King himself dropped in once to ask the entertainer if he had everything necessary."

At four o'clock in the afternoon, a brilliant company assembled in the hall to witness the performance. The *pièce-de-resistance* of the *séance* was Cagliostro's casket, the effect of which is best described in Houdin's own words :

"I borrowed from my noble spectators several handkerchiefs, which I made into a parcel, and laid on the table. Then, at my request, different persons wrote on the cards the names of places whither they desired their handkerchiefs to be invisibly transported.

"When this had been done, I begged the King to take three of the cards at hazard, and choose from them the place he might consider most suitable.

"'Let us see,' Louis Philippe said, 'what this one says: "I desire the handkerchiefs to be found beneath one of the candelabra on the mantelpiece." That is too easy for a sorcerer; so we will pass to the next card: "The handkerchiefs are to be transported to the dome of the Invalides." That would suit me, but it is much too far, not for the handkerchiefs, but for us, Ah, ah!' the King added, looking at the last card, 'I am afraid, Monsieur Robert-Houdin, I am about to embarrass you. Do you know what this card proposes?'

"'Will your majesty deign to inform me?'

"'It is desired that you should send the handkerchiefs into the chest of the last orange-tree on the right of the avenue.'

"'Only that, sir? Deign to order, and I will obey.'

"'Very good, then; I should like to see such a magic act: I, therefore, choose the orange-tree chest.'

"The king gave some orders in a low voice, and I directly saw several persons run to the orange-tree, in order to watch it and prevent any fraud.

"I was delighted at this precaution, which must add to the effect of my experiment, for the trick was already arranged, and the precaution hence too late.

"I had now to send the handkerchiefs on their travels, so I

placed them beneath a bell of opaque glass, and, taking my wand, I ordered my invisible travellers to proceed to the spot the king had chosen.

“I raised the bell; the little parcel was no longer there, and a white turtle-dove had taken its place.

“The King then walked quickly to the door, whence he looked in the direction of the orange-tree, to assure himself that the guards were at their post; when this was done, he began to smile and shrug his shoulders.

“‘Ah! Monsieur Houdin,’ he said, somewhat ironically, ‘I much fear for the virtue of your magic staff.’ Then he added, as he returned to the end of the room, where several servants were standing, ‘Tell William to open immediately the last chest at the end of the avenue, and bring me carefully what he finds there—if he *does* find anything.’

“William soon proceeded to the orange-tree, and though much astonished at the orders given him, he began to carry them out.

“He carefully removed one of the sides of the chest, thrust his hand in, and almost touched the roots of the tree before he found anything. All at once he uttered a cry of surprise, as he drew out a small iron coffer eaten by rust.

“This curious ‘find,’ after having been cleaned from the mould, was brought in and placed on a small ottoman by the king’s side.

“‘Well, Monsier Robert-Houdin,’ Louis Philippe said to me, with a movement of impatient curiosity, ‘here is a box; am I to conclude it contains the handkerchiefs?’

“‘Yes, sire,’ I replied, with assurance, ‘and they have been there, too, for a long period.’

“‘How can that be? the handkerchiefs were lent you scarce a quarter of an hour ago.’

“‘I cannot deny it, sire; but what would my magic powers avail me if I could not perform incomprehensible tricks? Your Majesty will doubtlessly be still more surprised, when I prove to your satisfaction that this coffer, as well as its contents, was deposited in the chest of the orange-tree sixty years ago.’

“‘I should like to believe your statement,’ the King replied, with a smile; ‘but that is impossible, and I must, therefore, ask for proofs of your assertion.’

“‘If Your Majesty will be kind enough to open this casket they will be supplied.’

“‘Certainly; but I shall require a key for that.’

“‘It only depends on yourself, sire, to have one. Deign to remove it from the neck of this turtle-dove, which has just brought it you.’

“Louis Philippe unfastened a ribbon that held a small rusty key, with which he hastened to unlock the coffer.

“The first thing that caught the King’s eye was a parchment, on which he read the following statement :

“ ‘ This day, the 6th June, 1786,

This iron box, containing six handkerchiefs, was placed among the roots of an orange-tree by me, Balsamo, Count of Cagliostro, to serve in performing an act of magic, which will be executed on the same day sixty years hence before Louis Philippe of Orleans and his family.’

“ ‘There is decidedly witchcraft about this,’ the king said, more and more amazed. ‘Nothing is wanting, for the seal and signature of the celebrated sorcerer are placed at the foot of this statement, which, Heaven pardon me, smells strongly of sulphur.’

“At this jest the audience began to laugh.

“ ‘But,’ the king added, taking out of the box a carefully sealed packet, ‘can the handkerchiefs by possibility be in this?’

“ ‘Indeed, sire, they are; but, before opening the parcel, I would request your majesty to notice that it also bears the impression of Cagliostro’s seal.’

“This seal once rendered so famous by being placed on the celebrated alchemist’s bottles of elixir and liquid gold, I had obtained from Torrini, who had been an old friend of Cagliostro’s.

“ ‘It is certainly the same,’ my royal spectator answered, after comparing the two seals. Still, in his impatience to learn the contents of the parcel, the king quickly tore open the envelope and soon displayed before the astonished spectators the six handkerchiefs which, a few moments before, were still on my table.

“This trick gained me lively applause.”

Robert-Houdin never revealed the secret of this remarkable experiment in natural magic, but the acute reader, especially if he be a student of legerdemain, will be able to give a pretty shrewd guess as to the *modus operandi*. The best analysis of this trick has been lately given by Brander Matthews, the noted American literary critic and himself a student of the fascinating art of conjuring. He writes as follows (*Scribner’s Magazine*, May, 1903):

“Nothing more extraordinary was ever performed by any mere conjurer; indeed, this feat is quite as startling as any of those attributed to Cagliostro himself, and it has the advantage of being

accurately and precisely narrated by the inventor. Not only is the thing done a seeming impossibility, but it stands forth the more impressively because of the spectacular circumstances of its performance,—a stately palace, a lovely garden, the assembled courtiers, and the royal family. The magician had to depend on his wits alone, for he was deprived of all the advantages of his own theater and of all possibility of aid from a confederate mingled amid the casual spectators.

“Robert-Houdin was justified in the gentle pride with which he told how he had thus astonished the King of the French. He refrained from any explanation of the means whereby he wrought his mystery, believing that what is unknown is ever the more magnificent. He did no more than drop a hint or two, telling the reader that he had long possessed a cast of Cagliostro’s seal, and suggesting slyly that when the King sent messengers out into the garden to stand guard over the orange-tree the trick was already done and all precautions were then futile.

“Yet, although the inventor chose to keep his secret, any one who has mastered the principles of the art of magic can venture an explanation. Robert-Houdin has set forth the facts honestly; and with the facts solidly established, it is possible to reason out the method employed to accomplish a deed which, at first sight, seems not only impossible but incomprehensible.

“The first point to be emphasised is that Robert-Houdin was as dexterous as he was ingenious. He was truly a prestidigitateur, capable of any sleight-of-hand. Nothing was simpler for so accomplished a performer than the substitution of one package for another, right before the eyes of all the spectators. And it is to be remembered that although the palace was the King’s, the apparatus on the extemporised stage was the magician’s. Therefore, when he borrowed six handkerchiefs and went up on the stage and made them up into a package which remained on a table in sight of everybody, we can grant without difficulty that the package which remained in sight did not then contain the borrowed handkerchiefs.

“In fact, we may be sure that the borrowed handkerchiefs had been conveyed somehow to Robert-Houdin’s son who acted as his assistant. When the handkerchiefs were once in the possession of the son out of sight behind the scenery or hangings of the stage, the father would pick up his package of blank visiting-cards and distribute a dozen of them or a score, moving to and fro in very leisurely fashion, perhaps going back to the stage to get pencils which he would also give out as slowly as possible, filling up the

time with playful pleasantry, until he should again catch sight of his son. Then, and not until then, would he feel at liberty to collect the cards and take them over to the King.

“When the son had got possession of the handkerchiefs, he would smooth them swiftly, possibly even ironing them into their folds. Then he would put them into the parchment packet which he would seal twice with Cagliostro’s seal. Laying this packet in the bottom of the rusty iron casket, he would put on top the other parchment which had already been prepared, with its adroit imitation of Cagliostro’s handwriting. Snapping down the lid of the casket, the lad would slip out into the corridor and steal into the garden, going straight to the box of the appointed orange-tree. He could do this unobserved, because no one was then suspecting him and because all the spectators were then engaged in thinking up odd places to which the handkerchiefs might be transported. Already, in the long morning, probably while the royal household was at its midday breakfast, the father or the son had loosened one of the staples in the back of the box in which the designated orange-tree was growing. The lad now removed this staple and thrust the casket into the already prepared hole in the center of the roots of the tree. Then he replaced the staple at the back of the box, feeling certain that whoever should open the box in front would find the soil undisturbed. This most difficult part of the task once accomplished, he returned to the stage, or at least in some way he signified to his father that he had accomplished his share of the wonder, in the performance of which he was not supposed to have any part.

“On seeing his son, or on receiving the signal that his son had returned, Robert-Houdin would feel himself at liberty to collect the cards on which various spectators had written the destinations they proposed for the package of handkerchiefs which was still in full sight. He gathered up the cards he had distributed; but as he went toward the King, he substituted for those written by the spectators others previously prepared by himself,—a feat of sleight-of-hand quite within the reach of any ordinary performer. Of these cards, prepared by himself, he forced three on the sovereign; and the forcing of cards upon a kindly monarch would present little difficulty to a prestidigitateur of Robert-Houdin’s consummate skill.

“When the three cards were once in the King’s hands, the trick was done, for Robert-Houdin knew Louis Philippe to be a shrewd man in small matters. Therefore, it was reasonably certain

that when the King had to make a choice out of three places, one near and easy, a second remote and difficult, and a third both near and difficult, Louis Philippe would surely select the third which was conveniently at hand and which seemed to be at least as impossible as either of the others.

The event proved that the conjurer's analysis of the king's character was accurate: yet one may venture the opinion that the magician had taken every needed precaution to avoid failure even if the monarch had made another selection. Probably Robert-Houdin had one little parchment packet hidden in advance somewhere in the dome of the Invalides and another tucked up out of sight in the base of one of the candelabra on the chimney-piece; and if either of the other destinations had been chosen, the substitute packet would have been produced and the magician would then have offered to transport it also into the box of the orange-tree. And thus the startling climax of the marvel would have been only a little delayed.

“When so strange a wonder can be wrought under such circumstances by means so simple, we cannot but feel the force of Dr. Lodge's warning that an unwavering scepticism ought to be the attitude of all honest investigators toward every one who professes to be able to suspend the operation of a custom of nature. No one of the feats attributed to Home, the celebrated medium who plied his trade in Paris during the Second Empire, was more abnormal than this trick of Robert-Houdin's, and no one of them is so well authenticated. It may be that certain of the customs of nature are not inexorable and that we shall be able to discover exceptions now and again. But the proof of any alleged exception, the evidence in favor of any alleged violation of the custom of nature, ought to be overwhelming.”

IV.

The greatest event of Houdin's life was his embassy to Algeria, “at the special request of the French Government, which desired to lessen the influence of the Marabouts, whose conjuring tricks, accepted as actual magic by the Arabs, gave them too much influence.” He went to play off his tricks against those of Arab priests, or holy men, and, by “greater marvels than they could show, destroy the *prestige* which they had acquired. He so completely succeeded that the Arabs lost all faith in the miracles of the Marabouts, and thus was destroyed an influence very dangerous to the

French Government." His first performance was given at the leading theater of Algiers, before a great assemblage of Arabs, who had been summoned to witness the *soirée magique*, by the mandate of the Marshall-Governor of Algeria. Houdin's "Light and Heavy Chest" literally paralysed the Arabs with astonishment. He altered the *mise-en-scène*, and pretended to be able to make the strongest man so weak that he would be unable to lift a small box from the floor. He says in his memoirs :

"I advanced with my box in my hand, to the center of the 'practicable,' communicating from the stage to the pit; then addressing the Arabs, I said to them :

"'From what you have witnessed, you will attribute a supernatural power to me, and you are right. I will give you a new proof of my marvellous authority, by showing that I can deprive the most powerful man of his strength and restore it at my will. Any one who thinks himself strong enough to try the experiment may draw near me.' (I spoke slowly, in order to give the interpreter time to translate my words.)

"An Arab of middle height, but well built and muscular, like many of the Arabs are, came to my side with sufficient assurance.

"'Are you very strong?' I said to him, measuring him from head to foot.

"'Oh yes!' he replied carelessly.

"'Are you sure you will always remain so?'

"'Quite sure.'

"'You are mistaken, for in an instant I will rob you of your strength, and you shall become like as a little child.'

"The Arab smiled disdainfully, as a sign of his incredulity.

"'Stay,' I continued; 'lift up this box.'

"The Arab stooped, lifted up the box, and said to me, 'Is this all?'

"'Wait ——!' I replied.

"Then with all possible gravity, I made imposing gesture, and solemnly pronounced the words :

"'Behold! you are weaker than a woman; now, try to lift the box.'

"The Hercules, quite cool as to my conjuration, seized the box once again by the handle, and gave it a violent tug, but this time the box resisted, and, spite of his most vigorous attacks, would not budge an inch.

"The Arab vainly expended on this unlucky box a strength which would have raised an enormous weight, until at length ex-

hausted, panting, and red with anger, he stopped, became thoughtful, and began to comprehend the influences of magic.

“He was on the point of withdrawing; but that would be allowing his weakness, and that he, hitherto respected for his vigor, had become as a little child. This thought rendered him almost mad.

“Deriving fresh strength from the encouragements his friends offered him by word and deed, he turned a glance around them, which seemed to say, ‘You will see what a son of the desert can do.’

“He bent once again over the box: his nervous hands twined around the handle, and his legs, placed on either side like two bronze columns, served as a support for the final effort.

“But, wonder of wonders! this Hercules, a moment since so strong and proud, now bows his head; his arms, riveted to the box, undergo a violent muscular contraction: his legs give way, and he falls on his knees with a yell of agony.

“An electric shock, produced by an inductive apparatus, had been passed, on a signal from me, from the further end of the stage into the handle of the box. Hence the contortions of the poor Arab!

“It would have been cruelty to prolong this scene.

“I gave a second signal, and the electric current was immediately intercepted. My athlete, disengaged from his terrible bondage, raised his hands over his head.

“‘Allah! Allah!’ he exclaimed, full of terror; then, wrapping himself up quickly in the folds of his burnous, as if to hide his disgrace, he rushed through the ranks of the spectators and gained the front entrance.

“With the exception of the dignitaries occupying the stage boxes and the privileged spectators, in the body of the house, who seemed to take great pleasure in this great experiment, my audience had become grave and silent, and I heard the words ‘Shaitan!’ ‘Djenoum!’ passing in a murmur round the circle of credulous men, who, while gazing on me, seemed astonished that I possessed none of the physical qualities attributed to the angel of darkness.”

The Marabout priests constantly boasted of their invulnerability. They were reputed to be possessed of powerful talismans which caused loaded weapons to flash in the pan when fired at them. Houdin counteracted these claims by performing his celebrated bullet-catching feat, in which a marked bullet apparently shot from a gun is caught by the magician in a plate or between

his teeth. There are two ways of accomplishing this trick. One is by substituting a bullet of hollow wax for the real leaden bullet. The explosion scatters the wax into minute fragments which fly in all directions and do not come in contact with the person shot at; provided he stands at a respectable distance from the individual who handles the pistol or gun. The second method is to insert into the barrel of the weapon a small tube open at one end. Into this receptacle the bullet falls, and the tube is withdrawn from the gun in the act of ramming it, forming as it were a part of the ramrod. The performer once in possession of the little tube, secretly extracts the marked bullet and produces it at the proper time. Houdin had recourse to both ways of performing this startling trick. Sometimes he filled the wax bullet with blood, extracted from his thumb. When the bullet smashed against a white wall it left a red splash. Houdin, after travelling into the interior of Algeria, visiting many prominent chieftains, returned to France, and settled down at St. Gervais, a suburb of Blois. He relinquished his theater to his brother-in-law, Pierre Chocat (M. Hamilton), and devoted himself to scientific work, and writing his *Confidences* and other works on natural magic. Speaking of the former, Brander Matthews says, "these 'Confidences of a Prestidigitator' are worthy of comparison with all but the very best autobiographies—if not with Cellini's and Franklin's, at least with Cibber's and Goldoni's. Robert-Houdin's life of himself, quite as well as any of the others, would justify Longfellow's assertion that "autobiography is what biography ought to be."

In the humble opinion of the writer, Houdin's autobiography is worthy to be classed with the best, even that of Cellini. It is replete with interesting information of old time necromancers, constructors of automata, good stories of contemporary magicians, exposés of Marabout miracles, and last but not least the fascinating adventures of Houdin himself,—the archmaster of modern magic. It bears the stamp of truth on every page, and should be placed in the hands of all students of psychology and pedagogy. His "Trickeries of the Greeks," an exposé of gambling devices, is also an interesting work and should be read in conjunction with his *Stage Magic* and *Conjuring and Magic*.

Houdin's villa at St. Gervais was a veritable palace of enchantments. Electrical devices played a prominent part at *L'Attrape Abbey*, as his friends jokingly called it—"Catch 'em Abbey." Says William Manning¹:

¹ Author of a charming little brochure, *Houdini*.

“Robert-Houdin’s employment of electricity, not only as a moving power for the performance of his illusions, but for domestic purposes, was long in advance of his time. The electric bell, so common to us now, was in every-day use *for years* in his own house, before its value was recognised by the public.

“He had a favorite horse, named Fanny, for which he entertained great affection, and christened her ‘the friend of the family.’ She was of gentle disposition and was growing old in his service; so he was anxious to allow her every indulgence, especially punctuality at meals and full allowance of fodder.

“Such being the case, it was a matter of great surprise that Fanny grew daily thinner and thinner, till it was discovered that her groom had a great fancy for the art formerly practised by her master and converted her hay into five-franc pieces! So Houdin dismissed the groom and secured a more honest lad, but to provide against further contingencies and neglect of duty he had a clock placed in his study, which with the aid of an electrical wire worked a food supply in the stable, a distance of fifty yards from the house. The distributing apparatus was a square funnel-shaped box which discharged the provender in prearranged quantities. No one could steal the oats from the horse after they had fallen, as the electric trigger could not act unless the stable door was locked. The lock was outside, and if any one entered before the horse had finished eating his oats, a bell would immediately ring in the house.

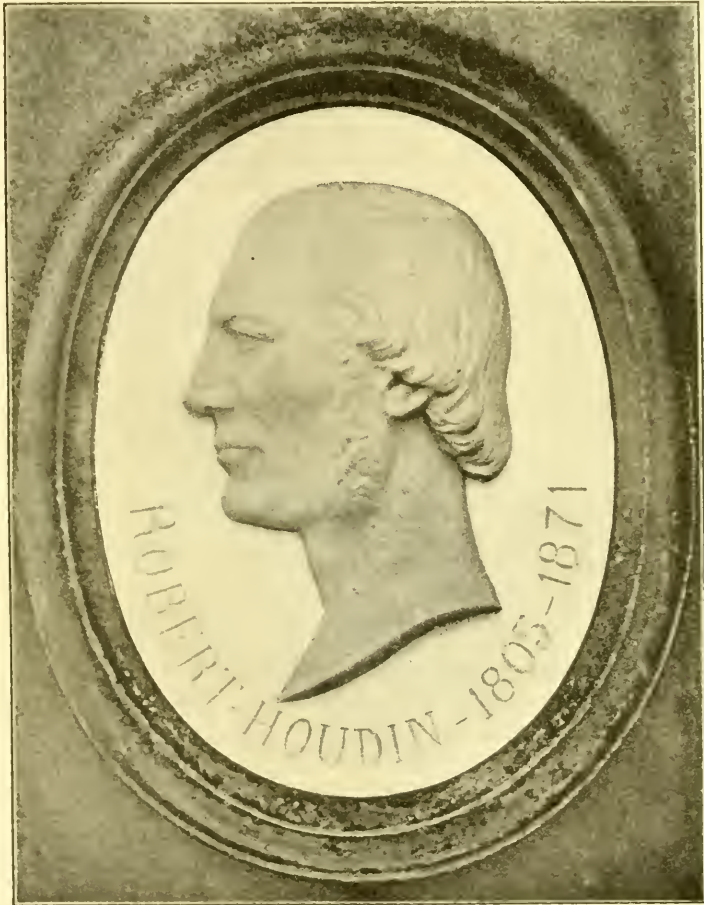
“This same clock in his study also transmitted the time to two large clock-faces, placed one on the top of the house, the other on the gardener’s lodge, the former for the benefit of the villagers.

“In his bell-tower he had a clockwork arrangement of sufficient power to lift the hammer at the proper moment. The daily winding of the clock was performed automatically by communication with a swing-door in his kitchen, and the winding-up apparatus of the clock in the clock-tower was so arranged that the servants in passing backward and forward on their domestic duties unconsciously wound up the striking movement of the clock.”

The “Priory,” as Houdin named it, is now a partial ruin. It has passed out of his family. Houdin died there June 13, 1871, after an illness of ten days. His death was caused by pneumonia. The following is an extract of the notice of his decease, taken from the registers of the civil authorities of St. Gervais:

“June 14, 1871. Notice of the death of Robert-Houdin, Jean-Eugène, died at St. Gervais, June 13, 1871, at 10 P. M., sixty-five years of age. Son of the defunct Prosper Robert and Marie Cathé-

rine Guillon; widower of his first wife Josephé Cecile Eglantine Houdin; married the second time to Françoise Marguerite Olympe Naconnier; Court House of St. Cervais, signed—The Mayor." The signature is illegible.



MEDALLION PORTRAIT OF ROBERT-HOUDIN.

From his tomb at Blois, France. From an original photograph taken by Mr. Harry Houdini, the American conjurer. (Published by permission of David McKay & Co., Philadelphia, Pa.)

His son Eugène was killed at Reichshoffen in the Franco-Prussian War. He was a sub-lieutenant in the French army and a graduate of the military school at St. Cyr. He assisted his father on the stage but abandoned conjuring for a military career. Émile,

the elder son, who distinguished himself in the "Second-Sight Trick," as soon as his father retired from the stage, became a

St. Germain, près Blois, le 6^g 1860

Cher Bourdilliat

Je m'attendais, ces jours derniers, à recevoir de vous un exemplaire de la deuxième édition de mes Confidences; mais, ne voyant rien venir, je me décidai à vous adresser cette question:

Si mon livre a du mérite
Près des lecteurs quelque mérite;
Pourquoi l'Éditeur qui m'édite
Médite-t-il pour m'éditer?

Quoiqu'il en soit, cher Bourdilliat,
recevez les meilleures de mes amitiés et
croyez-moi toujours

très dévoué

Robert Houdin

FACSIMILE OF A LETTER BY HOUDIN, FROM *L'Ilusioniste*, March, 1902.

watchmaker. He published a work on horology to which his father wrote the following preface:

"I have often been asked why my son did not follow the career I had opened for him in prestidigitation, but preferred instead the

study of horology. My answer to the question may be used fitly as a preface to this pamphlet.

“If you believe in hereditary vocations, here is a case for their just application. My son’s maternal great-grandfather, Nicolas Houdin, was a watchmaker of great merit in the last century. J. F. Houdin, his son, has gained, as is well known, a prominent place among the most distinguished watchmakers of his time. A certain modesty, which you will understand, prevents me from praising my father as highly; I shall only say that he was a very skilful and ingenious watchmaker. Before devoting myself to the art of conjuring, based on mechanism, I, too, was for a long time a watchmaker and achieved some success.

“With such genealogy, should one not be predestined to horology? Therefore my son was irresistibly drawn to his vocation, and he took up the art which Berthoud and Bréguet have made famous. It was from the latter of the two celebrated masters that he learned the elements of the profession of his forefathers.”

Émile was subsequently induced to take up the magic wand, and in conjunction with Professor Brannet gave many clever entertainments. During his management the old theater in the Palais Royal was abandoned, and a new theater erected on the Boulevard des Italiens. He held this property until his decease in 1883. The theater was partly destroyed by fire, January 30, 1901, but was rebuilt.

The only surviving members of the family are Madame Émile Robert-Houdin, widow of the elder son, and a daughter who is married to M. Lemaitre Robert-Houdin, a municipal officer of Blois, who has adopted the name of Houdin. Robert-Houdin is interred in the cemetery of Blois. A handsome monument marks his grave.

At the Paris Exhibition of 1844, Houdin was awarded a medal for the ingenious construction of automata; at the Exhibition of 1855 he received a gold medal for his scientific application of electricity to clocks. He invented an ophthalmoscope to enable the operator to examine the interior of his own eye. From important papers in the possession of M. Lemaitre it seems more than probable that Houdin had worked out the secret of the modern telephone before it had been made known to the world at large.