

NATURAL MAGIC AND PRESTIDIGITATION.

BY HENRY RIDGELY EVANS.

"What, Sir! you dare to make so free,
And play your hocus-pocus on us."

—Goethe, *Faust*, Scene V.

I.

THE art of natural magic dates back to the remotest antiquity. There is an Egyptian papyrus in the British museum which chronicles a magical séance given by a certain Tchatcha-em-anph before King Khufu, B. C. 3766. The manuscript says of the wizard: "He knoweth how to bind on a head which hath been cut off, he knoweth how to make a lion follow him as if led by a rope, and he knoweth the number of the stars of the house (constellation) of 'Thoth.'" It will be seen from this that the decapitation trick was in vogue ages ago, while the experiment with the lion, which is unquestionably a hypnotic feat, shows hypnotism to be very ancient indeed. Ememoser, in his *History of Magic*, devotes considerable space to Egyptian thaumaturgy, especially to the wonders wrought by animal magnetism, which in the hands of the priestly hierarchy must have been miracles indeed to the uninitiated. All that was known of science was in possession of the guardians of the temples, who frequently used their knowledge of natural phenomena to gain ascendancy over the ignorant multitude.

Egypt was magic mad. The Book of the Dead, that strange old Bible of the land of Mizraim, is practically a work on sorcery. When a man died, his soul was supposed to wander through the dark underworld, there to meet with many adventures by flood and field, until it was finally judged by Osiris and his forty-one judges. To ward off the demoniacal influences that beset its path, it was necessary for the errant soul to have recourse to magic spells. These charms were elaborately set forth in the Book of the Dead, a copy of which, or parts of copies, was deposited with the mummy

of the deceased—that is if the surviving relatives of the dead person were rich enough to pay for it.

Strange people these ancient Egyptians. Besides the official magi or priests of the temples, there were hundreds of small fry soothsayers, witches, and wizards, who retailed love philters, told fortunes, and conjured up the shades of the departed.

In Greece and Rome thaumaturgy was a recognized profession. The temples were storehouses of magic and mystery.

In the Middle Ages the art of magic was ardently cultivated, in spite of the denunciations of the Church. Many pretenders to



ORIENTAL CONJUROR PERFORMING THE CUP AND BALL TRICK, WITH SNAKE EFFECT INTRODUCED.

From an old and rare book called *The Universal Conjuror or the Whole Art of Legerdemain as Practised by the Famous Breslaw, Katterfelto, Jonas, Flockton, Conus, and by the Greatest Adepts in London and Paris, etc.* London. (From the Ellison Collection, New York.)

necromancy made use of the secrets of optics and acoustics, and gained thereby a wonderful reputation as genuine sorcerers. Benvenuto Cellini, sculptor, goldsmith, and man-at-arms, in that greatest of autobiographies,* records a magical séance which reads like a chapter from the Arabian Nights.

* *Memoirs of Cellini*, Book I, Chapter LXIV.

He says: "It happened through a variety of singular accidents that I became intimate with a Sicilian priest, who was a man of very elevated genius and well instructed in both Latin and Greek letters. In the course of conversation one day we were led to talk about the art of necromancy, apropos of which I said: 'Throughout my whole life I have had the most intense desire to see or learn something of this art.' Thereto the priest replied: 'A stout soul and a steadfast must the man have who sets himself to such an enterprise.' I answered that of strength and steadfastness of soul I should have enough and to spare, provided I found the opportunity. Then the priest said: 'If you have the heart to dare it, I will amply satisfy your curiosity.' Accordingly we agreed upon attempting the adventure.

"The priest one evening made his preparations, and bade me find a comrade, or not more than two. I invited Vincenzo Romoli, a very dear friend of mine, and the priest took with him a native of Pistoja, who also cultivated the black art. We went together to the Coliseum; and there the priest, having arrayed himself in necromancers' robes, began to describe circles on the earth with the finest ceremonies that can be imagined. I must say that he had made us bring precious perfumes and fire, and also drugs of fetid odor. When the preliminaries were completed, he made the entrance into the circle; and taking us by the hand, introduced us one by one inside of it. Then he assigned our several functions: to the necromancer, his comrade, he gave the pentacle to hold; the other two of us had to look after the fire and the perfumes; and then he began his incantations. This lasted more than an hour and a half; when several legions appeared, and the Coliseum was all full of devils. I was occupied with the precious perfumes, and when the priest perceived in what numbers they were present, he turned to me and said: 'Benvenuto, ask them something.' I called on them to reunite me with my Sicilian Angelica."

It seems the spirits did not respond. The magic spells were found inoperative, whereupon the priest dismissed the demons, observing that the presence of a pure boy was requisite to the successful accomplishment of the séance.

Another night Cellini and the sorcerer repaired to the mines of the Coliseum. The artist was accompanied by a boy of twelve years of age, who was in his employ, and by two friends, Agnolino Gaddi and the before-mentioned Romoli. The necromancer, after describing the usual magic circle and building a fire, "began to utter those awful invocations, calling by name on multitudes of de-



CONJUROR PULLING A TOOTH BY PISTOL.

From a rare book called *The Whole Art of Hocus Pocus, Containing the Most Dexterous Feats of Sleight-of-hand Performed by Katerfelto, Breslaw, Boas, etc.* London, 1812. (From the Ellison Collection, New York.)

mons who are captains of their legions * * *; inasmuch that in a short space of time the whole Coliseum was full of a hundred-fold as many as had appeared upon the first occasion." At the advice of the wizard, Cellini again asked to be re-united with his mistress. The sorcerer turned to him and said: "Hear you what they have replied; that in the space of one month you will be where she is. The company within the magic circle were now confronted by a great company of demons. The boy declared that he saw four armed giants of immense stature who were endeavoring to get within the circle. They trembled with fear. The necromancer to calm the fright of the boy assured him that what they beheld was but *smoke and shadows*, and that the spirits were under his power. As the smoke died out, the demons faded away, and Cellini and his friends left the place fully satisfied of the reality of the conjurations. As they left the Coliseum, the boy declared that he saw two of the demons leaping and skipping before them, and often upon the roofs of the houses. The priest paid no attention to them, but endeavored to persuade the goldsmith to renew the attempt on some future occasion, in order to discover the secret treasures of the earth. But Cellini did not care to meddle more in the black art.

What are we to believe about this magic invocation? Was Cellini romancing? Though a vainglorious, egotistical man, he was truthful, and his memoirs may be relied on.

John Addington Symonds, one of the translators of Cellini's autobiography, remarks: "Imagination and the awe-inspiring influences of the place, even if we eliminate a possible magic-lantern among the conjurer's appurtenances, are enough to account for what Cellini saw. He was credulous, he was superstitious."

Sir David Brewster, who quotes Cellini's narrative, in his *Natural Magic*, explains that the demons seen in the Coliseum "were not produced by any influence upon the imaginations of the spectators, but were actual optical phantasms, or the images of pictures or objects produced by one or more concave mirrors or lenses. A fire is lighted, and perfumes and incense are burnt, in order to create a ground for the images, and the beholders are rigidly confined within the pale of the magic circle. The concave mirror and the objects presented to it having been so placed that the persons within the circle could not see the aerial image of the objects by the rays directly reflected from the mirror, the work of deception was ready to begin. The attendance of the magician upon his mirror was by no means necessary. He took his place along with the spectators within the magic circle. The images of the

devils were all distinctly formed in the air immediately above the fire, but none of them could be seen by those within the circle.

“The moment, however, the perfumes were thrown into the fire to produce smoke, the first wreath of smoke that rose through the place of one or more of the images would reflect them to the eyes of the spectators, and they would again disappear if the wreath was



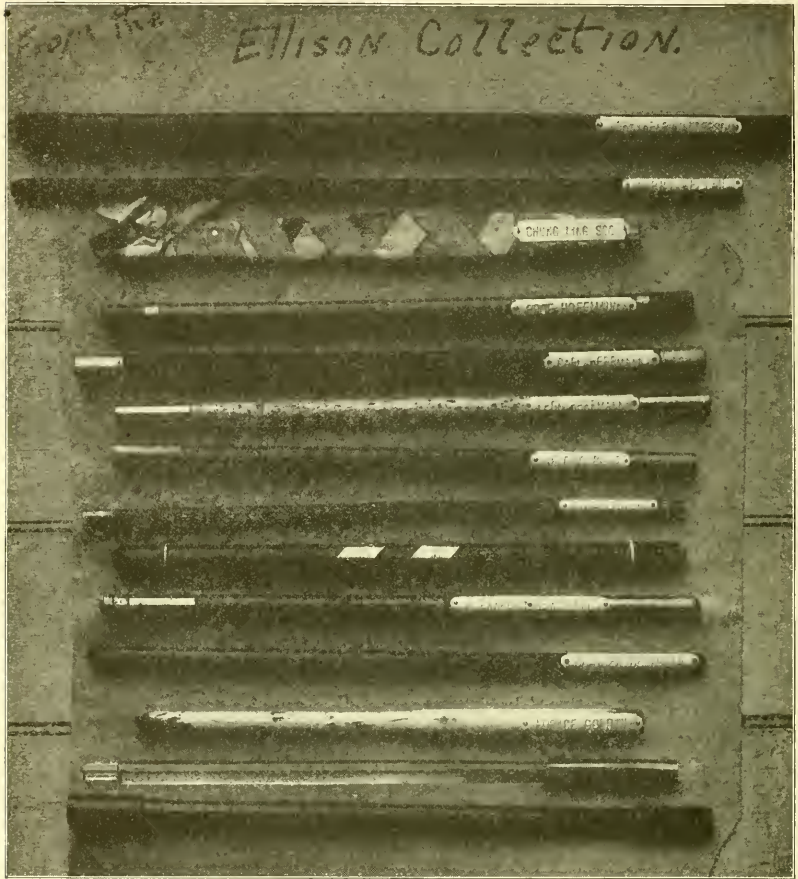
ROBERTSON'S ILLUSION ON A SMALL SCALE.

(From a French print.)

not followed by another. More and more images would be rendered visible as new wreaths of smoke arose, and the whole group would appear at once when the smoke was uniformly diffused over the place occupied by the images.”

Again, the magician may have been aided by a confederate amid the ruins, who manipulated a magic lantern, or some device of

the kind. The magician himself may have been provided with a box fitted up with a concave mirror, the lights and figures of the demons. The assertion of the boy that he saw demons skipping in front of him, etc., would be accounted for by the magic box being carried with them.



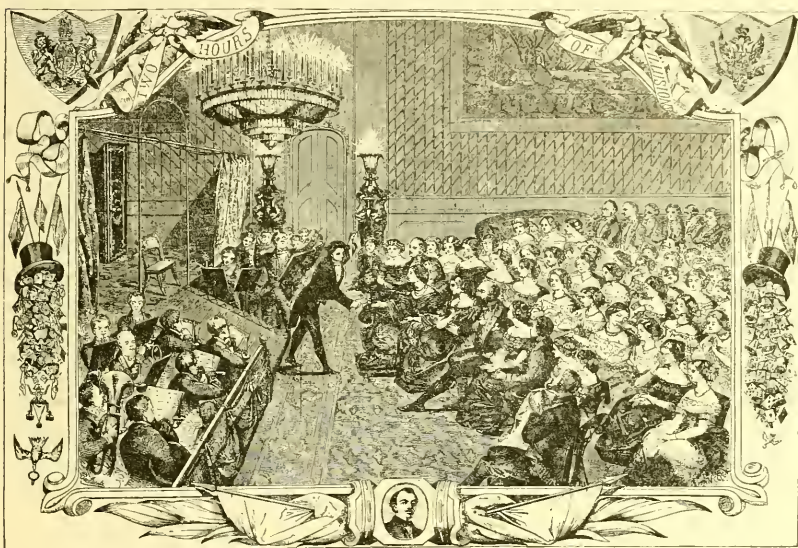
WANDS OF FAMOUS MAGICIANS.

(From the Ellison Collection, New York.)

Says the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, in speaking of Cellini's adventure: "The existence of a camera at this latter date (middle of 16th century) is a fact; for the instrument is described by Baptista Porta, the Neopolitan philosopher, in his *Magia Naturalis* (1558). And the doubt how magic lantern effects could have been produced in the 14th century, when the lantern itself is alleged to have been

invented by Athanasius Kircher in the middle of the 17th century, is set at rest by the fact that glass lenses were constructed at the earlier of these dates,—Roger Bacon, in his *Discovery of the Miracles of Art, Nature, and Magic* (about 1260), writing of glass lenses and perspectives so well made as to give good telescopic and microscopic effects, and to be useful to old men and those who have weak eyes.”

Chaucer, in the *House of Fame*, book iii, speaks of “appearances such as the subtil tregetouos perform at feasts—images of hunting, falcony, and knights jousting, with the persons and objects instantaneously disappearing.”



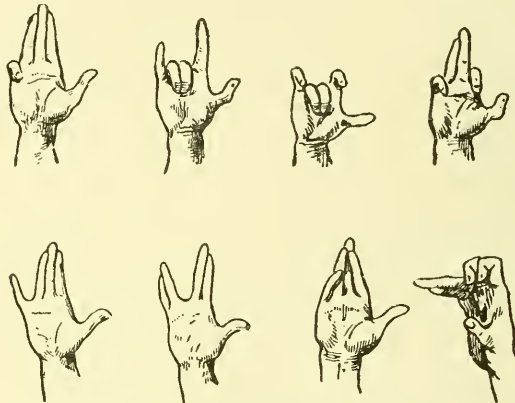
PROF. WILJALBA FRIKELL'S CHRISTMAS ENTERTAINMENTS
As exhibited before Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle.

Later on Nostradamus conjured up a vision of the future king of France in a magic mirror, for the benefit of Marie de Midecis. This illusion was effected by mirrors adroitly concealed amid hanging draperies.

In the 16th century conjurers wandered from place to place, exhibiting their tricks at fairs, in barns, and at the castles of noblemen. They were little more than strolling gypsies or vagabonds. Reginald Scott in his *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), enumerates some of the stock feats of these mountebanks. The list includes, “swallowing a knife; burning a card and reproducing it from the

pocket of a spectator; passing a coin from one pocket to another; converting money into counters, or counters into money; conveying money into the hand of another person; making a coin pass through a table or vanish from a handkerchief; tying a knot and undoing it 'by the power of words'; taking beads from a string, the ends of which are held fast by another person; making a coin to pass from one box to another; turning wheat into flour 'by the power of words'; burning a thread and making it whole again; pulling ribbons from the mouth; thrusting a knife into the head of a man; putting a ring through the cheek; and cutting off a person's head and restoring it to its former position."

Conjuring with cups and balls belongs to this list. It is very ancient, dating back to the early Roman period.

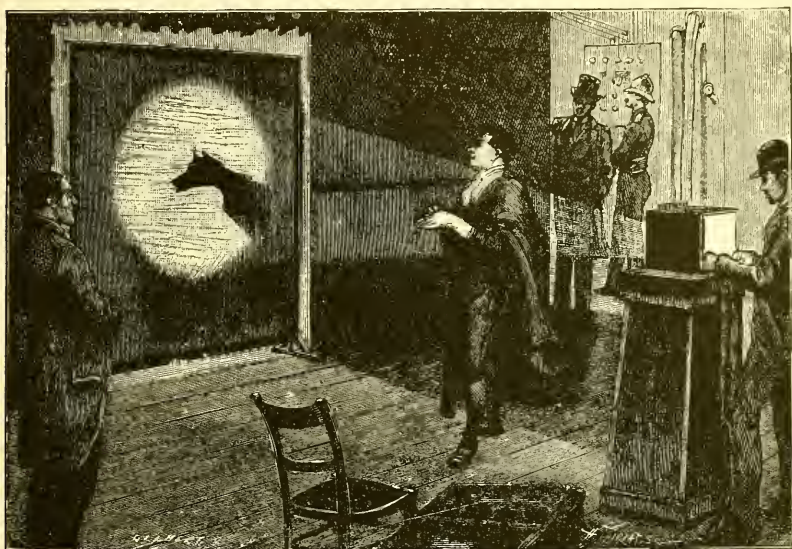


EXERCISES FOR THE FINGERS BY TREWEY.

The conjurers of the 16th century, and even later date, wore about their waists a sort of bag, called the *gibécière*, from its resemblance to a game bag, ostensibly to hold their paraphernalia. While delving into this bag for various articles to be used in their tricks, the magicians succeeded in making substitutes, and secretly getting possession of eggs, coins, balls, etc. It was a very clumsy device, but indispensable for an open air performer, who usually stood encircled by the spectators. Finally the suspicious-looking *gibécière* was abandoned by all save strolling mountebanks, and a table with a long cloth substituted. This table concealed an assistant who made the necessary transformations required in the act, by means of traps and other devices. Conus, the elder, in the 18th century, abandoned the long table covers, and the concealed assistant for the *servante*. But his immediate competitors still adhered

to the draped tables, and a whole generation of later conjurers, among whom may be mentioned Comte, Baseo, and Phillippe, followed their example. Robert-Houdin struck the keynote of reform in 1844. He sarcastically called the suspiciously draped table a *boite a compere* (wooden confederate).

Conjurers in the 17th century were frequently known as *Hocus Pocus*. These curious words first occur in a pamphlet printed in 1641, in which the author, speaking of the sights of Bartholomew fair, mentions "*Hocus Pocus*, with three yards of tape or ribbon in



TREWEY EXHIBITING UPON A STAGE.

his hand, showing his art of legerdemain." The 17th century is the age of the strolling mountebank, who performed wherever he could get an audience; in the stable, barnyard, street, or fair. From him to the prestidigitator of the theatre is a long step, but no longer than from the barnstorming actor to the artist of the well-appointed playhouse. There is evolution in everything. It was not until the 18th century that conjuring became a legitimate profession. This was largely owing to the fact that men of gentle birth, well versed in the science of the age, took up the magic wand, and gave the art dignity and respectability.