

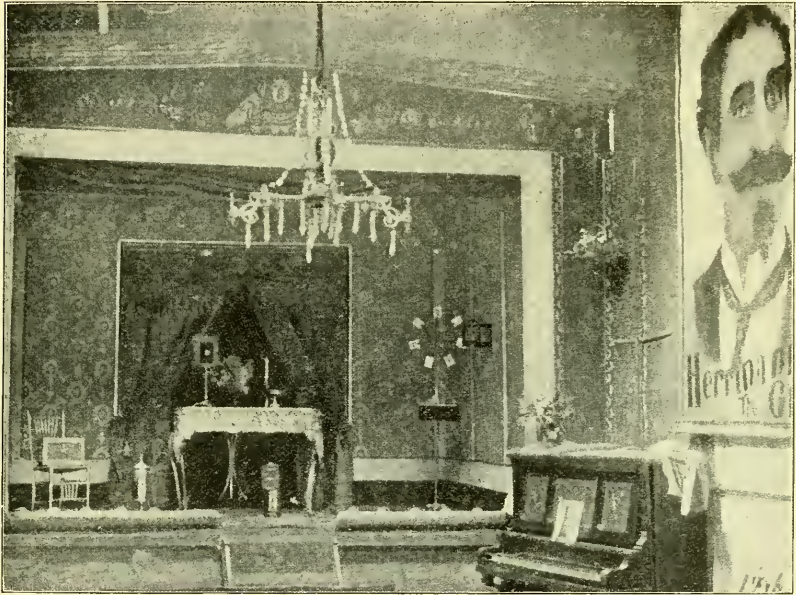
IN THE MAGIC CIRCLE.

BY HENRY RIDGELY EVANS.

I.

WHEN the citizen-king, Louis Philippe, ruled over the destinies of *la belle* France, there resided in Paris an old man by the name of M. Roujol, familiarly known among his confreres as "Father" Roujol. He kept a modest shop in the Rue Richelieu for the manufacture and sale of magical apparatus. The professional and amateur conjurers of the French capital made Roujol's their meeting place. "The Duc de M.—," says Robert-Houdin, "did not disdain to visit the humble emporium of the mystic art, and remain for hours conversing with Roujol and his associates." It was here that Houdin became acquainted with Jules de Rovère, of noble birth, a conjurer who abandoned the title of *escamoteur*, as beneath his aristocratic dignity, and coined for himself the pompous cognomen, *prestidigitateur*, from *presti digiti* (activity of the fingers). The French Academy sanctioned the formation of this word, thus handing it down to posterity. Jules de Rovère also called himself *Physicien du Roi*. Old Father Roujol is dust long ago; he has no successor in France. But we have a replica of his quaint place in New York City. On Sixth Avenue, not far from Thirtieth Street, is the shop of the Martinka Brothers. It is located on the ground floor of a dingy old building. In front is a tiny window, with a variety of magical apparatus displayed therein. Above the door in tarnished gold letters is the sign "Palace of Magic." The second floor is occupied by a Chinese restaurant. The Occident and Orient exist here cheek-by-jowl. The Chinaman concocts mysterious dishes to tickle the jaded palates of the *boulevardiers*; the proprietors of the Aladdin Palace of Up-to-Date Enchantments invent ingenious tricks and illusions to astound the eyes of their patrons. Here you may meet everybody in the magic line, from Kellar the Great to the humblest amateur, provided you are a member of the Society of American

Magicians. This society owes its foundation to two practising physicians of New York, Dr. W. Golden Mortimer, an ex-conjurer, and Dr. Saram R. Ellison, a great collector of magic literature. Ellison suggested the name, Mortimer wrote the ritual of the order, and the two of them called the meeting for the formation of the society. The first idea of such a fraternity of magicians was formulated by the writer of this paper, who endeavored to found a society called the *Sphinx*, but it proved abortive. The leading conjurers of the United States and Europe are enrolled among the members of the S. A. M. The meetings are held once a month at Martinka's,



BIJOU THEATRE OF THE MARTINKA BROS., NEW YORK.

usually followed by exhibitions of skill on the stage of the Bijou Theatre, attached to the place. Robert-Houdin, in the closing chapter of his "Secrets of Conjuring and Magic," remarks that it would be a superb sight to witness a performance by magicians, where each would show his *chef d'oeuvre* in the art. At Martinka's this is realized. Here you may see the very perfection of digital dexterity, mental magic, and the like. Mr. Martinka possesses many interesting relics of celebrated performers: Alexander Herrmann's wand, Robert Heller's orange tree, and photographs galore of magicians, living and dead. The electrical sofa, used by Heller in his second-

sight trick, is owned by Mr. Francis J. Martinka, and graces his



X-RAY PHOTOGRAPH OF KELLAR'S HAND..

(In the possession of Mr. Francis J. Martinka, New York.)

dining room. Some of the most important illusions of the day have been built in the shop of the Martinka Brothers.

It was here that I first became acquainted with Alexander Herrmann and Harry Keller, whose careers I will briefly sketch.

Alexander Herrmann, who was of Jewish origin, was born in Paris, February 11, 1844. Information concerning his family is very meagre indeed. His father, Samuel Herrmann, a physician, was an accomplished conjurer, but did not give professional performances, and was against his son taking up magic. The eldest brother, Carl, despite the parental opposition became famous as a sleight-of-hand artist, and was known as the "First Professor of Magic in the



HERRMANN I, II, III.

World." The father was ambitious to have Alexander follow the profession of medicine, but fate willed otherwise. Alexander, when quite a boy, ran away and joined Carl, acting as his assistant. He remained with his brother six years, when his parents placed him in college at Vienna. He did not complete his scholastic studies, but went to Spain in 1859 and began his career as a magician. He appeared in America in 1861, but returned a year later to Europe, and made an extended tour. He played an engagement of 1,000 consecutive nights at Egyptian Hall, London. In 1875 he married Adelaide Scarsez, a beautiful and clever danseuse, who assisted him

in his *soirées magique*. Herrmann became a naturalized citizen of the United States in 1876. He died of heart failure in his private car, December 11, 1896, while traveling from Rochester, N. Y., to Bradford, Penn. He was buried with Masonic honors in New York City. He made and lost several fortunes. Unsuccessful theatrical speculations were largely responsible for his losses. He aspired in vain to be the manager and proprietor of a chain of theatres. He introduced the celebrated Trewey, the French *fantaisiste*, to the American public. Herrmann was an extraordinary linguist, a *raconteur* and wit. Several chivalric orders were conferred upon him by European potentates. He usually billed himself as the Chevalier



TREWEY.



ALEXANDER HERRMANN.

Alexander Herrmann. His mephistophelean aspect, his foreign accent, and histrionic powers, coupled with his wonderful sleight-of-hand made him indeed the king of conjurers. He had a wrist of steel and a palm of velvet. He performed tricks wherever he went, in the street cars, cafés, clubs, hotels, newspaper offices, and markets, imitating in this respect the renowned Bosco. These impromptu entertainments widely advertised his art. He rarely changed his *repertoire*, but old tricks in his hands were invested with the charm of newness. I can remember as a boy with what emotion I beheld the rising of the curtain, in his fantastic soirées, and saw

him appear, in full court costume, smiling and bowing. Hey, presto! I expected every moment to see him metamorphosed into the Mephisto of Goethe's "Faust," habited in the traditional red costume, with red cock's feather in his pointed cap, and clanking rapier by his side; sardonic, and full of subtleties. He looked the part to perfection. He was Mephisto in evening dress. When he performed the trick of the inexhaustable bottle, which gave forth any liquor called for by the spectators, I thought of him as Mephisto in that famous drinking scene in Auerbach's cellar, boring holes into an old table, and extracting from them various sparkling liquors as well as flames. In his nervous hands articles vanished and reappeared with surprising rapidity. Everything material, under the spell of his flexible fingers, seemed to be resolved into a fluidic state; as elusive as pellets of quicksilver. He was indeed the Alexander the Great of Magic, who had conquered all worlds with his necromancer's wand—theatrical worlds; and he sighed because there were no more to dominate with his legerdemain. One of his posters always fascinated my boyish imagination. It was night in the desert. The Sphinx loomed up majestically under the black canopy of the Egyptian sky. In front of the giant figure stood Herrmann, in the center of a magic circle of skulls and cabalistic figures. Incense from a brazier ascended and circled about the head of the Sphinx. Herrmann was depicted in the act of producing rabbits and bowls of gold fish from a shawl, while Mephisto, the guardian of the weird scene, stood near by, dressed all in red, and pointing approvingly at his disciple in the black art. In this picture were symbolized Egyptian mystery and necromancy; mediæval magic; and the sorcery of science and prestidigitation.

After Herrmann's death, he was succeeded by his nephew, Leon Herrmann—Herrmann III, who is a successful performer.

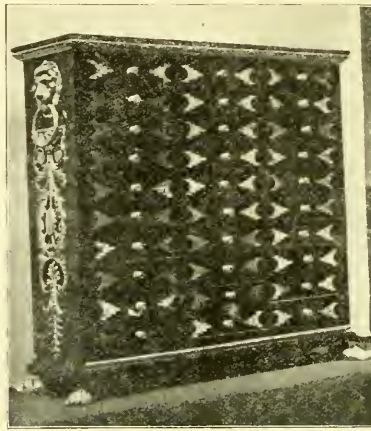
His widow exhibits in vaudeville and gives a very clever entertainment of magic, entitled "An Evening in Japan."

II.

Let us now pass in review some of the great Herrmann's tricks. His gun illusion was perhaps his most sensational feat. I am indebted to the late Frederick Bancroft for a correct explanation of the startling trick.

A squad of soldiers under the command of a sergeant, comprised the firing party. The guns were apparently loaded with genuine cartridges, the bullets of which had been previously marked for identification by various spectators. The soldiers stood upon

a platform erected in the centre of the theatre, and Herrmann stationed himself upon the stage. The guns were fired at him, and he caught the balls upon a plate. Upon examination the balls were found to be still warm from the effects of the explosion, and the marks were identified upon them. The substitution of the sham cartridges, which were loaded into the guns, for the genuine ones was very subtly executed by means of a trick salver having a small well let into its centre to hold the cartridges. Into this well the marked cartridges were deposited by the spectators. In the interior of the salver was a second compartment loaded with the blank cartridges. The sergeant who collected the bullets shifted the com-



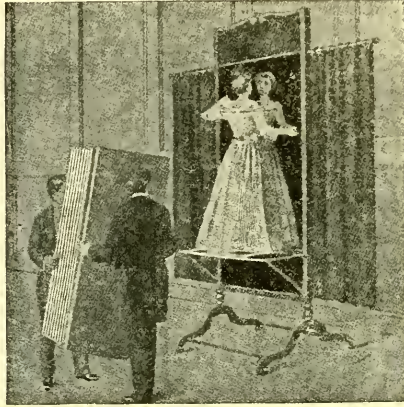
MAGICAL CABINET CONSTRUCTED BY CARL HERRMANN.

The magician places a card in any of the little drawers of the cabinet, and it will reappear in any other drawer the onlooker may suggest. (Now in the possession of Mr. Martinka, New York City.)

partments by means of a peg underneath the salver, as he walked from the audience to the stage. The sham cartridges were now brought to view and the real were hidden in the body of the salver. While the soldiers were engaged in loading their rifles with the blank cartridges, the sergeant went behind a side scene to get his gun, and deposit the salver. A couple of assistants extracted the genuine bullets and heated them. Herrmann went to the wing to get the plate, and secretly secured the marked bullets. The rest of the trick consisted in working up the dramatic effects.

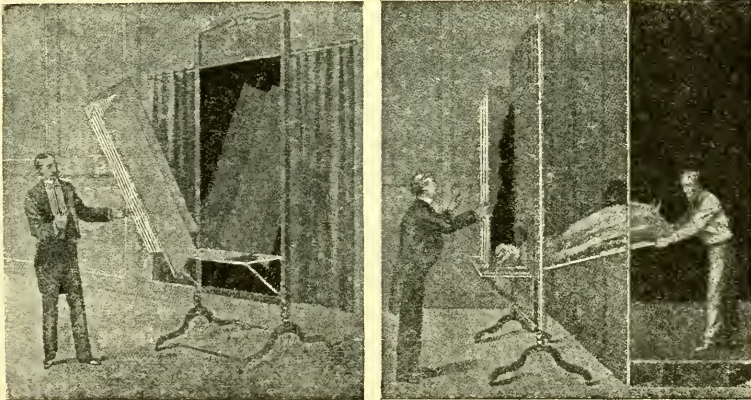
One of Herrmann's best illusions, though not invented by him,

was his vanishing lady, known as "Vanity Fair" and "After the Ball." A large pier glass, which was elevated some two feet above the stage, was brought forward by the magician, and the glass shown to be solid, back and front. Mme. Herrmann, dressed in a



"AFTER THE BALL"—I. SCREENING THE LADY.

handsome ball costume, was now introduced to the audience. By the aid of a small ladder, she climbed up and stood upon a glass shelf immediately in front of the mirror. A narrow screen was



"AFTER THE BALL"—2. THE ESCAPE.

then placed about her, so as not to hide from the spectators the sides of the mirror.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Herrmann, "Madame Vanity Fair, who is now gazing at her pretty features in the mirror, has

only to pronounce a certain mystic formula known to the Cabalists, and she will be instantly transported to the grand ball at the Opera House. This is a decided improvement on horses and carriages." He fired a pistol, and the screen was pulled away. The lady was found to have completely vanished. But how? Not into the mirror, into that land of adumbration, celebrated in "Alice's Adventures in a Looking Glass." No, the glass was apparently of solid crystal, and too thin to conceal anyone. This is the *modus operandi* of the trick: The mirror in reality was composed of two sections. The glass shelf upon which the lady stood, concealed the top of the lower section. The upper section was placed to the rear of the lower mirror, so that its lower end slid down behind it. This upper glass worked like a window sash. When it was pushed up, its upper end was hidden in the wide panel of the frame. The lower part of this large glass had a piece cut out. Through this opening the lady was drawn by an assistant. When she had escaped through the back scene, the counterpoised mirror was again pushed down into its proper place. The fact that some of the mirror was in view during the exhibition allayed suspicion on the part of the audience. It was one of the most novel and effective illusions of Herrmann's repertoire, particularly because of the fact that he was assisted by his pretty and graceful wife, who looked charming in her elegant ball dress, and acted her part to perfection.

III.

The dean of American magicians is the famous Harry Kellar, who was born in Erie, Penn. He went on the stage when a boy, as assistant to the Fakir of Ava. Subsequently he served an apprenticeship with the notorious Brothers Davenport, spirit mediums, and from them learned the mysteries of rope-tying feats. Kellar is today the leading exponent of the *art magique* in the United States. He makes a specialty of pseudo-clairvoyance, second-sight, spirit cabinets, feats of levitation, and mechanical illusions. He has traveled extensively in the Orient, and visited the courts of Indian Rajahs. Seizing upon the modern craze for Hindoo necromancy, mahatma miracles, and the like, he presents many of his tricks and illusion as examples of Eastern thaumaturgy. Unlike Herrmann the Great, who bubbled over with wit and humor, and acted the comedian, Kellar assumes a Sphinx-like demeanor and surrounds himself with an air of Egyptian mystery. His entertainments appeal to the scholarly and refined. They are conducted with great solemnity and dignity. One almost imagines himself to be

in an Egyptian Temple, witnessing the magic feats of the hierophants. Kellar has written several monographs on his art—mainly contributions to magazines; all highly suggestive and entertaining. He says: “There are six qualifications which are of the essence of the successful magician, prestidigitateur, necromancer—call him what you may. They are: The will, manual dexterity, physical strength, the capacity to perform things automatically, an accurate, perfectly ordered and practically automatic memory, and a knowledge of a number of languages, the more the better.”

Speaking of his experiences as stage helper, or *chela* to the so-called Fakir of Ava, he says (*Independ*, May 28, 1903): “The ‘face’ of many a prestidigitateur has been saved and his defeat turned into a glorious victory by the merest chance. One of my first adventures with the Fakir of Ava affords a capital illustration. We were doing the watch trick—taking a timepiece from some one in the audience, passing it upon the stage in a platter, destroying both platter and timepiece in plain view of the spectators, loading the fragments into a pistol, firing the weapon at a target and bringing the watch—whole and sound—to life again upon the face of the mark, in plain sight of the audience. But on that particular day the target concluded not to do its share of the performance. No watch would it produce; the machinery was out of order. We had to work hard to ‘save face.’

“Disguised as an usher of the house, I went down into the audience with the timepiece, hoping to be able to slip it unobserved into the pocket of the owner. He was sitting at a distance from the aisle; I found it impossible. I did the next best thing—slipped the watch into the waistcoat pocket of the man who sat next to the aisle on the same row with the owner. Then I returned to the stage.

“The Fakir in the meantime was discussing learnedly upon some other subject. When I returned, the question of the whereabouts of the watch was called up and a bell on the stage was summoned to answer questions; one ring for ‘yes,’ two for ‘no.’

“‘Is the watch on the stage?’

“‘No,’ replied the obedient bell.

“‘Is it in the audience?’

“‘Yes.’

“‘Is it on the first row?’

“‘No.’

“‘The second—the third, the fourth, the fifth?’

“‘To each question came a ‘no.’

“‘Is it on the sixth row?’

“‘Yes.’

“‘Is it the first man on the row?’

“‘Yes.’

“The eyes of the audience focused upon the unfortunate occupant of the seat.

“‘Look in your pocket, sir,’ said the Fakir of Ava, in his politest, most persuasive tones.

“‘Go on with your show there and let me alone,’ shouted the enraged seat holder.

“‘But I pray you, look in your pocket,’ said the Fakir.

“The man obeyed and produced the watch! The trick, called

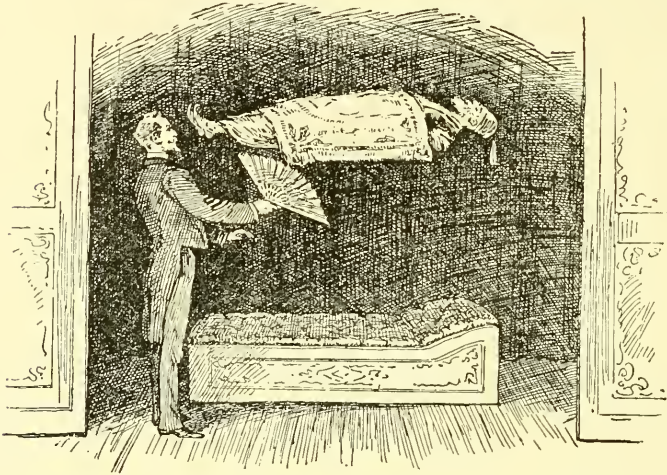


FIG. 5. THE CELEBRATED “LEVITATION” MYSTERY.

in stage vernacular a ‘life saver,’ made a hit vastly more impressive than the one originally planned but spoiled by the perverseness of the target.”

Kellar’s greatest and most sensational illusion is his “levitation”—raising a person and leaving him suspended in mid-air without any apparent means of support, seemingly defying the law of gravitation. The explanation of this surprising feat is thus described by a writer in the *Strand Magazine* (London):

“An assistant is introduced, laid upon an ottoman, and then sent off into a hypnotic trance (?). The performer takes an ordinary fan and fans the body while it rises slowly about four feet in the air, where it mysteriously remains for any length of time desired (Fig. 5). A large solid steel hoop is given for examina-

tion, and after the audience is satisfied as to its genuineness it is passed over the body from head to feet, behind the body and over it again, at once dispelling the idea of wires or any other tangible support being used, the body, as it were journeying through the hoop each time. The suspended assistant is now fanned from above and gently descends to the ottoman as slowly and gracefully as he rose from it. He is then brought back to his normal state out of the trance, and walks off none the worse for his aerial pose.

"This seeming impossibility is performed by the aid of a cranked bar (Fig. 6 and A, Fig. 7) and a pulley to raise it, the bar being pushed through from the back at the moment when the performer

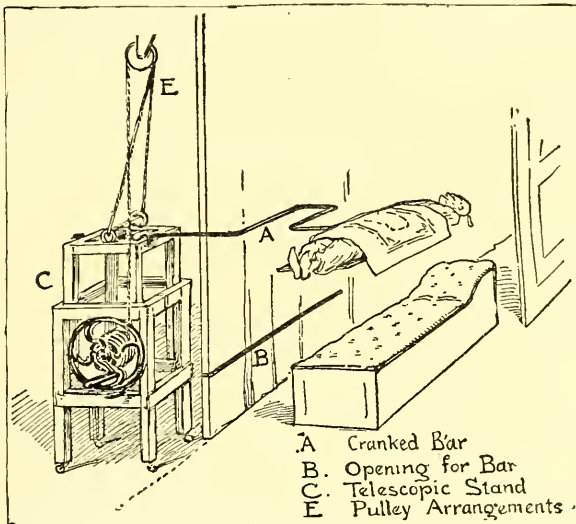


FIG. 6. "LEVITATION"—HYPNOTISM OR MECHANISM?—WHICH?

is 'hypnotizing' the subject, and in the act of placing a light covering over him he guides a clamp (B, Fig. 7) and fixes it to the top of the ottoman upon which the subject rests, and which rises, unseen, with him, the edges being obscured by the covering. The bar being the same color as the back scene cannot be noticed, and resting upon a stand (C, Figs. 6 and 7) behind the scenes the same height as the ottoman it is kept firm by the aid of strong supports. Being also double the width (D, Fig. 7) at this part greater leverage is obtained to hold the board upon which the subject rests secure from tilting either way. By means of a pulley arrangement (E, Fig. 6) the assistant behind raises and lowers the body, looking through a small hole in the scenes and timing the

performer's movements with exactness. Fig. 5 shows the illusion as it appears. Fig. 6—a side view—shows the means of suspension and the pulley for raising the bar and telescopic stand. Fig. 7 almost explains itself. It shows the method of passing the ring over the body. By putting it on at (1) and passing it as far as the centre of the bar (A) it can be brought around and off the body at (2), apparently having passed right over it, although not free from the crank; it is then passed behind the body as far as (3), when it can be again placed over the end (1) and drawn across

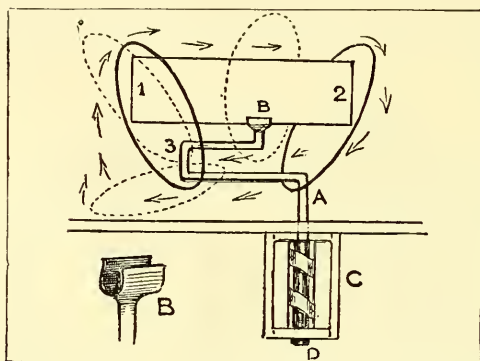


FIG. 7. "LEVITATION"—HOW THE HOOP IS PASSED OVER THE BODY.

once more, this time being, of course, quite free, having made an apparent circle right around and across the body. It seems evident to the audience that the subject is so raised and suspended by the performer's magic power alone. The sleeping subject is now lowered, and in the act of being 'dehypnotized' the performer slips the crank off, which is immediately drawn in from behind, the subject and performer sharing the applause. It is almost needless to explain that the 'hypnotism' is mere sham to heighten the effect and admit of an excuse to stoop in order to fix the cranked bar."