

CHEVALIER PINETTI—CONJURER.

BY HENRY RIDGELY EVANS.

I.

ON the Quai Voltaire, Paris, a few doors from the house where died the great iconoclast of the old Regime is a dark little shop, with a window full of musty missals, old armor, tapistry, Oriental curios, and rare prints. One morning I espied in this charming window an engraving—a portrait of the Chevalier Pinetti, who flourished during the eighteenth century. This picture was an allegorical affair. Two winged cupids were depicted placing the bust of Pinetti in the Temple of Arts.

The third cherub hovered overhead, holding in his right hand a laurel wreath, which he was about to deposit upon the head of the bust; in his left hand he flourished a trumpet, upon which to sound the praises of the illustrious Pinetti—who, by the way, was noted for blowing his horn to the fullest extent. Strewn about the Temple of Arts were the various instruments used in physics and mathematics. The motto appended to this print was as follows:

“Des genies placent le buste de M. le Professeur Pinetti dans le temple des arts, au milieu des instruemens de physique et de mathematique.” Then came Pinetti’s name, titles, etc.:

“Signor Guisseppe Pinetti, de Willidalle, Knight of the German order of Merit of St. Philip, professor of mathematics and natural philosophy, pensioned by the Court of Prussia, patronised by all the royal family of France, aggregate of the Royal Academy of Sciences and Belles-Lettres of Bordeaux,” etc.

One would naturally conclude, after reading these high-flown cognomens that Pinetti was a professor in some university, who had received the order of knighthood, and been admitted into various learned societies, in recognition of his scientific attainments. But such was not the case, at least so far as the university professorship is concerned. Chevalier Pinetti was a slight-of-hand per-

former, who made use of the resources of natural science in his tricks. He was the King of Conjurers of the eighteenth century. His life reads like a romance. After a brilliant, pyrotechnic career, he faded out into darkness. I have gathered my facts concerning him from old French and German brochures. Little or nothing is known about his ancestry, his youth, and early experiences.

He may have purposely guarded the secret of his origin, being inordinately boastful. He thoroughly understood how to avail himself of all the arts of the toilet to appear much younger than, according to his contemporaries, he must have been in reality.

It is believed that he first saw the light of day in 1750, in Orbello, a small fortified town of about three thousand inhabitants, lying in the foothills of what was then the Grand Duchy of Tuscany.

He is first heard of while travelling through the provinces of Germany, in 1783. In 1784 he appeared in Paris, where he gave a series of performances, and exhibited several times before the court of Louis XVI. with distinguished success. At this time the public showed a marked predilection for all kinds of mystical and inexplicable exhibitions, which had been awakened by the performances of various adventurers like Cagliostro, St. Germain, and Mesmer. Pinetti thoroughly understood how to make the most of this bent of the public mind, and succeeded in setting Paris in ecstasy, as well as becoming himself a model for all contemporary succeeding necromancers, for a long time. Though without fine or regular features, his physiognomy possessed much distinction; while his manners were excellent. It is probable, however, that the latter were acquired rather than innate; for extremely bad taste is betrayed by his frequently wearing on the stage, the uniform of a general, decorated with numerous orders. This is an oddity with a fatal suggestion of charlatanism. He was given to vaunting, and was in no wise careful to adhere to the truth in communications regarding his magical art. A vicious trait of character was his readiness to adopt the most contemptible measures to free himself of the rivalry of another; and this unworthy characteristic undoubtedly led to his ultimate downfall.

II.

Pinetti's repertory was very extended. However interesting it might be to pass in review the whole series of his feats, I must here limit myself to a few, which appear typical of him and of his public.

There was first the wonderful automaton known as "The Grand Sultan," also called "The clever little Turk," which was about forty centimeters in height, and which struck a bell with a hammer, or nodded and shook his head, in answer to questions propounded. "The golden head and the rings" was as follows: In a glass, the bottom of which was covered with coins, a previously shown, massive head was placed. A cover was then placed on the glass. The head answered yes or no to inquiries, or counted numbers, by leaping in the glass. In a second glass a number of rings were laid, which moved in unison with the head as though by sympathy. The "Clever Swan" was put into a vessel of water, and varied its course according to the will of the onlooker. Moreover when a spectator had drawn a card from a pack of inscribed cards, it spelled the word inscribed thereon, by moving toward the appropriate letters which were printed on strips of cardboard hung about the vessel.

A kind of sympathetic action is shown in the following experiment. A lighted lamp was deposited on a table. As soon as a spectator, stationed at a considerable distance, blew through a reed, the lamp was immediately extinguished. Another: a live dove was fastened, by means of two ribbons about its neck, to two opposite columns. On the instant when a picture of the dove, or even the shadow of the suspended bird, was pierced by a sword, the dove itself was beheaded, although it had not been disturbed; and the severed and still bleeding head, and the rest of the body, fell separately to the ground. This experiment, called "Theophrastus Paracelsus," recalls an old superstition, namely, that evil can be wrought upon a person, by injury to a picture of him, accompanied by a spoken incantation. It is the so-called "Picture charm."

Fettering and binding experiments were shown, but of a simpler nature than modern ones. To each leg of the magician was fastened a ring, and through each ring an iron chain was passed, its ends locked on a pillar. "The Prisoner" seemed aided by some external power to release himself, for in a very short time he was free from his bonds. More difficult was another experiment, wherein a chain was fastened by a strip of cloth directly about the leg and secured to the pillar; but here also a half minute sufficed the "Galley Slave" to free himself of the shackles. The most pleasing was the following trick: Pinetti allowed both thumbs to be tied together with a cord, and his hands, so bound, to be covered with a hat; hardly was this done, then he stretched out the right hand, seized a flask of wine and drank to the health of the person who

had tied him, and tossed the emptied glass to the ceiling, whence it fell as a ball of finely cut paper. At the same instant he allowed the hat to fall and displayed his hands, still as closely bound as at the beginning of the experiment. Also the well-known trick, in which a number of borrowed rings are passed over two ribbon bands, whose ends are knotted together and held by some of the spectators; nevertheless the rings were drawn off without severing the ribbons. This was hardly new, but merely a variation of a trick described in 1690 in a work by Ozanam in his *Recreations mathematiques*, and exhibited by the jugglers of that time under the name of "My Grandmother's Rose-wreath." They made use of small balls, strung on two cords, from which they were withdrawn notwithstanding that the cords were held by strangers. To-day this trick is explained in most books of games and amusements, which fact does not hinder the public from being quite as much astounded when the feat is performed *a la* Pinetti, with rings or a watch, accompanied by clever patter.

Pinetti's magical bouquet was a very pretty trick. In a vase were placed the dry, leafless stems of a bunch of flowers, tied together. At the magician's command leaves, flowers, and fruit appeared, transforming the bouquet into a thing of beauty; but all its splendor disappeared again at the command of the performer. His feat of "the recovered ring" was as follows: A ring was borrowed from a lady and fired from a pistol into a casket, which had been previously shown empty and devoid of preparation. When the casket was opened, after the shot was fired, a dove was seen within, holding in its bill the ring. But in addition, the pretty bird knew precisely the possessor of the ring, for it shook its head in rotation at each lady to whom the trinket did not belong. When the owner appeared the dove voluntarily presented the ring to her in its beak. In Naples, where Pinetti's theatre was situated directly on the sea shore, he varied the trick by firing the pistol loaded with the ring out of the window. On opening the casket a large fish was seen, bearing the ring in its mouth. Another clever experiment was the mechanical bird, which when set upon a flask, fluttered its wings, and whistled any favorite melody called for by the audience, also blowing out a lighted candle and immediately re-lighting it.

It would accomplish these feats just as well when removed from the flask to a table, or when held in the performer's hand upon any part of the stage. The sounds were produced by "a confederate who imitated song-bird's after Rossignol's method by aid

of the inner skin of an onion in the mouth ; and speaking-trumpets directed the sounds to whatever position was occupied by the bird." Though the two last-described feats were the most celebrated of Pinetti's masterpieces, the most remarkable without doubt was the one he called "The stolen shirt." In spite of its somewhat unseemly appearance it was shown before the king and his family ; and consisted of this : A gentleman from the audience, not in league with the performer, came upon the stage and at Pinetti's request



unfastened the buttons of his shirt at the neck and cuffs, and Pinetti, with only a few movements of his hand, drew the shirt from his body, though the gentleman had not removed a single article of his clothing.

Pinetti eventually revealed the process by which this surprising result was obtained. He was moved to do so, because all those who saw the trick performed in the Theatre des Menus-Plaisirs held the conviction that the other party to it was in collusion with him. The public was not to be blamed for this erroneous conclu-

sion, for not only at that time, but much later, many of the astonishing feats of the magician were effected through the complicity of assistants seated among the audience. Such confederates were called by the French, *Compere* and *Commere*, which translated into the vulgar vernacular stand for "pals," "cronies." These gentlemen brought articles, of which the magician possessed duplicates



and loaned them—apparently as unrelated spectators—when such articles were asked for in the course of the experiments. Robert Houdin ended this regime of confederacy. When he asked for the loan of an article, he genuinely borrowed it, and exchanged it for a substitute by sleight-of-hand. This is the modern method. The following is Pinetti's explanation of the "Shirt trick." "The

means of performing this trick are the following: only observing that the clothes of the person whose shirt is to be pulled off be wide and easy. Begin by making him pull off his stock, and unbuttoning his shirt at the neck and sleeves, afterwards tie a little string in the buttonhole of the left sleeve; then, passing your hand behind his back, pull the shirt out of his breeches, and slip it over his head; then pulling it out before in the same manner, you will leave it on his stomach; after that, go to the right hand, and pull the sleeve down, so as to have it all out of the arm; the shirt being then all of a heap, as well in the right sleeve as before the stomach, you are to make use of this little string fastened to the button-hole of the left sleeve, to get back the sleeve that must have slipped up, and to pull the whole shirt out that way. To hide your way of operating from the person whom you unshift, and from the assembly, you may cover his head with a lady's cloak, holding a corner of it in your teeth. In order to be more at your ease, you may mount on a chair and do the whole operation under the cloak."

Pinetti's explanation of the shirt trick was contained in a work published in the year 1784, entitled: "Amusements in physics, and various entertaining experiments, invented and executed at Paris and the various courts of Europe by the Chevalier M. Jean Joseph Pinetti Willedale de Merci, Professor of Physics, etc." As an expose of conjuring feats in general this book was an imposition on the public. It was intended to mislead the reader. In spite of the high sounding title of the work it contained nothing, outside of the solution of the "stolen shirt" mystery. There was no explanation of any trick upon which Pinetti set value, but merely experiments already published in preceding books on the juggler's art, and which belonged to a long past time, consisting mostly of chemical experiments, and childish diversions.

This unworthy publication, and Pinetti's custom of speaking of himself as endowed with preternatural powers aroused an adversary in the person of M. Henri Decremps, an accomplished and enthusiastic lover of the art of magic. From him appeared, in 1784, a book entitled "White Magic Revealed," addressed, as he declares in the preface, not to the great public, since "the world loves to be deceived and would rather believe the fairy tales of the imposter than the unvarnished truth of his opponent," but to the real lovers of an entertaining art. As this work set forth the real explanation of Pinetti's wonders, one may imagine what reception it met with from him and his admiring public. Characteristic of Pinetti is the manner in which he sought revenge on Decremps. In one of his

performances he deplored the fact that an ignorant imposter, solely with the intent of injuring him (Pinetti), sought to reveal mysteries which his intelligence was insufficient to grasp. All knew to whom he referred, who had the slightest knowledge of Decremps. And what now ensued? Hardly had Pinetti finished speaking, when a shabbily dressed and unprepossessing individual arose, assailed Pinetti with abuse and bade him take care, he would be fully exposed. The audience, indignant at the disturbance of an amusing performance, jeered the man from whom it proceeded and made preparation to expel the poor devil. Here intervened, however, the "good" Pinetti. In conciliatory, kindly fashion he accompanied his assailant to the door, ostentatiously presenting him also with several louis d'ors as indemnification for the harshness shown him.

Needless to explain, the expelled intruder was not the author of the book in question, but genuinely a "poor devil" who played his part in the comedy for a money consideration. However, Decremps was an able man, who could act with as much shrewdness as energy. In 1785 he followed his first book with a second, explaining Pinetti's newest tricks, the self-playing organ, artificial snakes and birds, chess-playing automatons, ascending balloons in human shape, perpetual motion, learned animals, automatic flute-playing, etc. The handling of the topic is much more thorough than in the first volume, and the matter interestingly set forth. It is in the form of letters of travel; the author, in company with a Mr. Hill, an Englishman, traverses distant lands, where remarkable and astonishing things are met with, and the causes and construction which bring about their wonderful results, are ascertained and explained.

They reach the Cape of Good Hope, where, amid a savage population, with many arts of refined civilisation, they encounter a wizard, who, in a bombastic declaration extols his own wonder-working powers. In the course of the narrative these feats are described and their operation explained. The behavior of the wizard is amusingly depicted. How strenuously he denies the truth of the solution found of his wonders by the strangers; how he endeavors by means of every artifice to hoodwink the public; how he first strives, through cunning and bribery, then through abuse and injury, to rid himself of his dangerous adversaries;—in all this is Pinetti's character so intimately pictured that we cannot err in supposing this entire portion of the book directed solely against him. And what name does he give the wizard? He calls him "Pilferer." Decidedly, Decremps could be severe.

The two books were later bound in one and issued on Feb. 15, 1785, with the title "White Magic Unveiled, or Explanation of the Surprising Tricks, lately the Admiration of Capital and Province. By M. Decremps, of the Museum of Paris."

Pinetti, who was an original genius, sought to overcome the effects of Decremps's revelations in other ways besides chicanery. He invented new illusions, performed his old tricks with greater dash and brilliancy and added new appointments to his *mise-en-scene* to dazzle and overcome the spectators. His patter was unceasing and convincing. But now was heard the distant thunder of the approaching social upheaval—the French Revolution. The political horizon was full of black clouds. The people of Paris began to desert the theatres for clubs and cafes, there to enter upon political discussions. Pinetti, seeing the audiences of his Temple of Magic dwindling away, packed up his apparatus and went to England, which is the immediate aim of all fugitives from France.

During his stay in London he made the following announcement in the newspapers: "The Chevalier Pinetti and his consort will exhibit most wonderful, stupendous and absolutely inimitable, mechanical, physical, and philosophical pieces, which his recent deep scrutiny in these sciences, and assiduous exertion, have enabled him to invent and construct; among which Chevalier Pinetti will have the special honor and satisfaction of exhibiting various experiments, of new discovery, no less curious than seemingly incredulous, particularly that of Mme. Pinetti being seated in one of the front boxes with a handkerchief over her eyes and guessing at everything imagined and proposed to her by any person in the company." Here we have the first mention of the "Second-Sight" trick, which Robert Houdin reinvented sixty-one years later, and which Robert Heller, not many years ago, by using electricity combined with verbal signals, made into such an astonishing feat of magic. The teachings of Mesmer and the so-called sorcery of Cagliostro evidently suggested the idea of this pretended clairvoyance to Pinetti. Truly was the Chevalier an original and creative genius. His repertoire consisted almost entirely of his own inventions and eclipsed those of contemporary conjurers. His rope-tying experiments were the prototypes for the cabinet evolutions of modern mediums.

III.

Late in the year 1769, Pinetti appeared in Hamburg and exhibited with great success in the "Drillhause," where Degabriel

and Philadelphia had played previously. From there he went to the principal cities of Germany and arrived at Berlin, where, in the then "Doebbelin'schen Theatre," in the Behrenstrasse, he produced his "Amusements Physiques," and soon became the avowed idol of the public.

In August, 1796, he appeared in Hamburg, at the French Theatre, on the Drehbahn, where his receipts were considerable. Such was not the case, however, in Altona, whose inhabitants were distinguished by lack of interest in any manifestation of his art. He gave there three exhibitions, which terminated with two empty houses. In Bremen, whither he next turned, the public was even more indifferent than in Altona, so that he abandoned the intention of performing there, returned to Berlin and there remained for some time.

Pinetti derived large profits from his entertainments. His entrance fee was by no means low. In Hamburg and Berlin, for instance, the price of the best places was a thaler—equivalent at present values to about ten marks, \$2.50. Pinetti saw carefully to the comfort and pleasure of his patrons, and heightened the effect of his skill by every available means. The eye was gratified by the splendor of the scenic accessories. In the middle of the stage, upon a superb carpet, stood two massive tables, which served in performance of the experiments. The center of these tables were covered with a scarlet cloth, bordered with broad stripes of dark velvet richly embroidered in gold and silver. Further in the background stood a larger and a smaller table with the same decorations, and with relatively slender and elaborately carved legs. Close to the rear of the stage was set a very long table, the cover of which extended to the carpet. This table was set forth with magnificent candelabra and brilliant apparatus. None of these tables were moved from their places. In the middle of the stage hung from the ceiling an immense chandelier of crystal, with countless candles, whose light blended with the light of the candelabra to illuminate the scene. The entrance and exit of the artist was through silken hangings.

As in Paris, so also in Berlin, Pinetti found an adversary in the person of Kosmann, professor of physics, who in daily and periodical publications sought to explain Pinetti's experiments. These elucidations were collected, bound together and published under the title: *Chevalier Pinetti's Recreations in Physics, or Explanation of His Tricks*, Berlin, 1797. As with Decremps so fared it with Kosmann. His explanations did not meet with public accord

and the contemporary press denominated the two authors "who sought to belittle Pinetti's skill" as mere apprentices compared with the latter, and their expositions "shallow and unsatisfactory." Naturally! The laity invariably form a false conception of the nature of the art of magic. They suppose the most complicated mechanism in the apparatus which the artist uses and overestimate the manual skill of the performer; and when their ability is insufficient to explain matters after their own fashion, they prefer to endow the performer with preternatural power rather than accept the "shallow" elucidations of "ignorant" expounders. They do not realise that every trick is only what the artist is able to make it, and that the simplest illusion may take an imposing aspect through the accessories thrown about it and the manner in which it is presented.

Whatever opinion the laity might have of these works their value was in no wise lessened for the instructed. Robert Houdin, an incontestable connoisseur as well as a "classical" witness, calls the work of M. Decremps, *Magic Unveiled*—whose first edition could not have been unknown to the Berlin professor—"an excellent work."

At the beginning of the carnival of 1798 Pinetti appeared in Naples and saw the whole city crowding to his performances.

Among the constant visitors to his theatre (on the strand) was numbered a young French nobleman, Count de Grisy, who had settled in Naples as a physician and was a welcome guest in the most distinguished circles of the town. A passionate lover of the art of magic, he succeeded in finding the key to a large portion of Pinetti's experiments, and amused himself in the closest circles of his intimates by repeating them. His ability became generally known and gained for him a kind of celebrity; he was invited to perform in the most aristocratic salons, but through modesty seldom accepted.

Finally his fame came to the ears of Pinetti, who was so much the more chagrined, because of the fact that people of fashion who had at first thronged to his theatre, now were deserting him. Nevertheless, he listened with apparent pleasure to the reports given him of De Grisy's skill, and sought to gain the acquaintance of the young physician. He frankly proffered his friendship, initiated De Grisy into his mysteries, and showed him the arrangement of his stage. The familiarity which Pinetti openly and intentionally displayed towards him might have displeased the young man under other circumstances, but his passion for magic and the persuasive

eloquence which Pinetti employed to arouse his ambition, made him blind to conduct, which, in the mind of one more versed in men, might have awakened suspicion.

So Pinetti succeeded, finally, in overcoming De Grisy's timidity in regard to a public appearance. He repeated the most flattering assurances of the latter's skill, and urged him to give a performance for the benefit of the poor of Naples. He would, declared Pinetti, attract a more distinguished audience than he himself could hope to do; and so De Grisy, who had already earned the gratitude of the poor, would become their greatest benefactor in all the city. Pinetti would himself make all previous arrangements most carefully, and would, moreover, hold himself in readiness behind the scenes to come to the young performer's assistance, if required. De Grisy at last gave reluctant consent. Fortune seemed to favor him, moreover, for the King signified his intention to attend in company with his entire court.

August 20, 1798, this extraordinary exhibition took place. The house was packed. The royal family received the young French emigrant with tokens of favor and sympathy. De Grisy, confident of success, was in the happiest mood, but in his very first experiment a bitter disillusion awaited him. A secret confederate, posted by Pinetti, had loaned a ring to carry out the already described trick, "The Recovered Ring," which was properly found in the mouth of the great fish. Conscious of the success of this loudly-applauded feat. De Grisy bowed his thanks, when an angry remonstrance was heard from the person who had loaned the ring. This man declared that in lieu of his costly gold ring, set with diamonds, there had been returned to him a trumpery imitation set with ordinary glass stones. A long and painful discussion ensued, and De Grisy owed it only to his tact that he finally extricated himself from the affair. He was not clear himself as to whether the ring had somehow been changed, or whether the assistant played a rôle from some secret motive.

He proceeded to the performance of his next experiment with less concern, in that no secret confederate was needed. He approached the King's box and asked him to do him the honor of drawing a card from a pack he tendered. The King complied with much graciousness; but scarcely had he looked at it than he flung it to the ground with every mark of his displeasure. De Grisy, confounded, picked up the card, and read on it a scandalous insult to the king, in Pinetti's handwriting! An attempt to explain and clear himself was checked by an imperative gesture from the King.

The betrayed man, who now understood the situation, distracted with rage, rushed behind the scenes with the intent to kill his deceitful friend. Like a maniac he traversed every portion of the house, but the Chevalier Pinetti had disappeared as though the earth had swallowed him! Wherever De Grisy now showed himself, he was received with jeers, hisses, and insults from his audience, until he fell senseless and was borne by servants to his house. After his rival's removal Pinetti appeared as though by chance, whereupon several persons in the secret called on him to continue the performance, to which he courteously acceded, and gained enthusiastic plaudits.

During a violent fever which ensued, De Grisy constantly called in his delirium for revenge on Pinetti; but the latter quitted Naples soon after the occurrence. Poor De Grisy was socially and professionally tabooed by the aristocracy of Naples. Pinetti's revenge seemed complete.

Though De Grisy thoroughly comprehended the contemptible ruse of his opponent, he was long in uncertainty how to punish him. His first impulse was to challenge the magician to fight a duel, but that idea he rejected. Pinetti was not worthy of such an honor. For the purpose of completing his restoration to health, De Grisy passed some time in the quiet of the country, and here the thought occurred to him to fight his betrayer with his own weapons, and, in this contest, to either conquer or wholly abandon all ideas of revenge. He set himself for half a year to the most assiduous study in order to attain perfection in the art of magic, not merely equal to Pinetti's, but superior to it. He improved on many of his rival's experiments, invented new ones, and expended his entire fortune in providing apparatus and decorations which should cast into the shade Pinetti's superb appointments.

And now issued De Grisy forth to a duel, bloodless, it is true, but none the less a struggle to the death.

He learned that Pinetti had, in the meantime, visited the principal cities of central Italy, and had just left Lucca with view of visiting Bologna next, later Modena, Parma, Piacenza, etc. Without loss of time De Grisy took his way to Modena, in order to forestall his rival there and debar him from any further performances. The latter had already caused the announcement of his forthcoming entertainments to be spread over the city, and the Modena journals had widely advertised the speedy coming of the wonder-worker, when suddenly the exhibitions of the "Count De Grisy, the French escamoteur," were announced. The people crowded the house

from top to bottom. De Grisy's success was unparalleled. Then, as the date for Pinetti's appearance drew near, he left the town and went to Parma. Pinetti had no faith in De Grisy's success, and installed himself in the same theatre, which the latter had lately quitted, in reliance on his own celebrity. But here began that humiliating experience which was henceforth to be his lot. The town was sated with this species of entertainment, and the Chevalier's house was empty. Still, accustomed to take the highest place, he would not yield to a "novice." Accordingly, he directed his steps to Parma immediately and established himself in a theatre just opposite to De Grisy's. In vain! He had the mortification of seeing his house deserted while his rival's was constantly filled. Nevertheless, Pinetti would not yield, but wheresoever De Grisy went he followed.

Thus were visited, one after another, Piacenza, Cremona, Mantua, Vicenza, Padua, and Venice, whose walls witnessed the embittered strife of the two rivals, until Pinetti, whose most zealous supporters were turning recreant, could blind himself no longer to the fact that he had lost the game which he and De Grisy had been playing. He closed his theatre and betook himself to Russia.

For a short time it seemed as though Fortune would indemnify him for his ill luck. But, after having for so long showered her favors on him, it now appeared that she had finally and definitely turned her back upon him. Long and severe illness exhausted not only his vigor, but the slender means he had saved from shipwreck. Pinetti fell into the most abject want. A nobleman in the village of Bartitschoff in Volhynien took him in from pity. And thus, at the turn of the century, ended the life of this richly gifted artist,—unfortunately so wanting in nobility of spirit.