



The Art of Magic

T. Nelson Downs

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An excerpt from the INTRODUCTORY.

For the purpose of this book it will be convenient to divide magic into three branches: manual dexterity, mental subtleties and the surprising results produced by a judicious and artistic blending of the second and third branches. There are other branches, to be sure; but they are of little interest to modern students of the magic art. A century ago, and, indeed, as late as Robert-Houdin's day, a general knowledge of the physical sciences was considered necessary to the equipment of the conjurer or magician; and the old writers on magic filled their pages with clumsy experiments in chemistry, physics, mechanics and mathematics. In order to be an original conjurer of the first magnitude, said Robert-Houdin, it is necessary to have more than a speaking acquaintance with the sciences, so as to apply their principles to the invention of illusions and stage tricks. Houdin himself utilized chemistry, optics and physics, while many of his greatest and most successful illusions were based on the then little known science of electricity. Things have changed since Houdin's day, however, and the art he practiced has taken many forward strides toward the goal of perfection.

The modern conjurer is little inclined to base his magical effects on the expedients of physical science, but rather places his reliance on neatness of manipulation, on ingenious and interesting patter, and on a dexterity which, in many cases, seems to have been raised to its Nth power. It was the "Father of Modern Conjuring" who laid down this admirable rule: "To succeed as a conjurer, three things are essential: first, dexterity; second, dexterity; and third, dexterity." Would not Robert-Houdin open his eyes in amazement could he return to earth and remark the advance made in dexterity and manipulation since his day? "I myself practiced palming long and perseveringly," he tells us in his monumental work on conjuring, "and acquired there at a very considerable degree of skill. I used to be able to palm two five-franc pieces at once, the hand nevertheless remaining as freely open as though it held nothing whatever." He is a very ordinary performer who, in this age, cannot conceal a dozen or fifteen coins in his hand, and pluck them singly from the palm to produce in a fan at the finger tips; and there are several specialists in coin manipulation who experience no difficulty in handling a larger number of coins, thinking nothing, for instance, of concealing from thirty-five to forty coins in the hand; and, what is even more remarkable, executing the pass with this unstable stack as easily and indetectably as if they were handling three or four half-dollars.

Magic has undergone many changes in the last quarter of a century. The devotees of the art have gone from one extreme to the other; from the simplicity of the school of Frickell to the cumbersome stage setting of Anderson, and from Anderson to Frickell again. The last decade was devoted to manipulation and specialization. Kings and emperors and dukes and panjamdrums of cards and coins, monarchs of eggs and handkerchiefs, czars of cabbages and billiard balls sprung up like mushrooms....

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