

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic

By

NEVIL MASKELYNE

This book is in the public domain.

This .html edition © 2000

José Antonio González

[Enter eBook](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#)

CONTENTS

PREFACE

PART I: THE ART IN MAGIC

- I. [THE REAL SECRETS OF MAGIC](#)
- II. [THE THREE DEGREES IN ART](#)
- III. [UNITY](#)
- IV. [CONSISTENCY](#)
- V. [JUSTIFICATION](#)
- VI. [SURPRISE AND REPETITION](#)
- VII. [EFFECTS OF TRANSITION](#)
- VIII. [CLIMAX](#)
- IX. [PRESENTATION](#)
- X. [REHEARSAL](#)
- XI. [SPEED IN PRESENTATION](#)
- XII. [PATTER](#)
- XIII. [STAGE MANNER AND PERSONALITY](#)
- XIV. [MENTAL ATTITUDE](#)
- XV. [THE IMPORTANCE OF ARTISTIC PRINCIPLES](#)

PART II: THE THEORY OF MAGIC

- I. [TERMINOLOGY](#)
- II. [GENERAL ANALYSIS](#)
- III. [MISDIRECTION](#)
- IV. [STYLES OF MAGIC](#)
- V. [MANIPULATIVE PRINCIPLES](#)
- VI. [PRINCIPLES OF MENTAL MAGIC](#)
- VII. [MECHANICAL PRINCIPLES](#)

VIII. [OPTICAL PRINCIPLES](#)

IX. [ACOUSTIC PRINCIPLES](#)

X. [ELECTRICAL PRINCIPLES](#)

XI. [CHEMICAL AND MOLECULAR PRINCIPLES](#)

XII. [MAGICAL INVENTIONS](#)

[Previous](#) | [Next](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic

by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Preface

IN WRITING this book, we have fulfilled a purpose that has long been held in view, viz:-the production of a work which would present our art in a truer light than is ordinarily shed upon it by textbooks and treatises. We have long been impressed by the fact that, unlike other technical subjects, magic has received scarcely any attention upon its theoretical side; but has been allowed to drift along the course of progress as best it might, unaided by the advantages that order and system could bestow. In any other calling, technical or artistic, the groundwork of the subject, invariably and as a matter of course, receives due attention on the part of those who follow that calling. Those who teach and those who study alike, are well aware that unless the fundamental principles-the theory of their subject are properly understood, there can be no chance of gaining any real knowledge such as an expert must possess. Then, since magic combines both art and science, the folly that it can be studied apart from its theory, its very constitution, is too obvious to require comment. Therefore, in this book, we have attempted the task of setting before the reader a plain and straightforward statement of the facts, principles, and reasoning essential to a proper understanding of our subject, so far as our ability will allow.

We do not for a moment suggest that what we have written herein represents the last word to be said concerning magic. On the contrary, we are well aware that our book is but the commencement of a new departure which, we hope, may lead to the full elucidation of our subject, in every particular. The ramifications and extensions of knowledge connected with magic are so vast in their scope that no single treatise can possibly include all that a skilled magician ought to know. Consequently, we can claim no more than the production of a book which, in our opinion, serves to indicate, rather than to exhaust, the manifold topics associated with the art, science, and practice of magic.

One notable feature of this work, which should, we believe, serve to prove the faith that is in us, consists in our unhesitating disclosure of original devices, and the modus operandi of original experiments in magic. So far from feeling any reluctance toward letting the general public into the secrets of our procedure, we are most anxious to educate the public in such matters, in order that a proper understanding of our art may be disseminated among its votaries and patrons. The point is this. Tricks and dodges are of comparatively small importance in the art of magic. At the utmost, they display inventive ability, but nothing more. The effect-and the effect

alone-produced by the use of such inventions, is the consideration of real importance.

For proof of this, we need only point out one well known fact, viz:-that the very best audience a skilled magician can have is one composed entirely of magicians. The reason for this should be self-evident. An audience of magical experts is bound to see the performer's feats in a proper light. Such an audience will very seldom be perplexed by what is exhibited, and will never attach great importance to "how it is done." Every member of such an audience will have his mind engrossed almost exclusively in noting the art with which the performer uses devices, known or unknown, to produce an intended effect. If his art is meritorious, the expert spectators will appreciate the performance highly, no matter how old, how new, how ingenious, or how simple may be the technical devices employed.

It will be difficult, we fear, to bring the general public to that standpoint. The average man is so firmly impressed with the notion that magic consists merely in puzzles offered for solution, challenges to the spectator's acuteness, that many years must elapse before that erroneous idea can be dispelled. Some day, however, we hope that even the man in the street will have learned the fact that so-called "secrets" are to the magician little more than are, to the actor, the wigs, grease-paints and other "make-up" with which he prepares himself for appearance before the public. The art of the magician, like that of the actor, depends upon matters far higher than mere appliances and processes. just as the actor, in the exercise of his art, employs certain means for making himself resemble the character he represents, so the magician employs devices essential to the guise in which he appears. As it happens, the magician's aids in this respect are necessarily more recondite than those of the actor. Owing to this fact, there has arisen the mistaken impression that the magician's art begins and ends in the devices he employs-whereas, in fact, those devices are merely his working tools. His art does not consist in the things he uses, nor in the trade secrets and technical processes he has at command, but in the employment of those facilities with adequate efficiency. It consists in what he does with the things he uses, not in those things themselves. In the hands of a skilled magician, a magical experiment becomes something vastly different from what it would be if conducted by a novice. That needs no argument whatsoever. And it is just in that very difference that the art of magic is comprised. Those who hold the view that the tools of magic are synonymous with the art of magic do great injustice to the magician and to his art alike.

Undoubtedly, we must admit that great progress in the art has been made during recent years. Both in artistry and in social standing the modern magician stands upon a plane far higher than that occupied by his predecessors of two or three generations ago. The average magician of today has been educated at a public school, and is socially qualified to rank with members of any other profession. He knows some Latin, and perhaps a trifle of Greek; and on occasion can speak French without giving his audience the cold shivers. So far as they go, these facts are eminently satisfactory, but more is requisite for the equipment of an artist in magic. The young gentlemen who constitute the vast bulk of rising magicians have not yet shaken themselves free from the trammels with which their less favored predecessors were

hampered. They have not, as a rule, learned to understand the art of magic as it really is, nor to recognize the nature of its constitution. In so far as they are true artists, they depend upon their instinctive leaning toward refinement and appropriate procedure. They go to work the right way because they feel it to be the right-not because they know it to be right. As for explaining why any particular course of action is right, that is beyond the powers of almost any among them. This is where the rising generation lacks understanding, the simple reason being a lack of proper training in the theory and constitution of the art they profess.

We hope this present book may serve, at least, to provide a clue, by which those who blindly grope in the ancient labyrinth which they falsely regard as "the art of magic," may be led to a standpoint from which clearer views can be gained.

N.M.

D.D.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic

by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER I

THE REAL SECRETS OF MAGIC

BEYOND doubt, the attractiveness of magic is largely due to its secrets. Not only to the general public, but also to the professional magician, the secrets of magic represent the most fascinating branch of the subject. They are, among all classes of society, a popular topic for conversation. They have given birth to whole libraries of literature and are responsible for a mass of chuckle headed opinions-greater in number and variety, perhaps, than have ever resulted from the discussion of any other subject under the sun.

Unfortunately, however, notwithstanding the constant attention devoted to this theme, the real secrets of the magic art have received but scant consideration. Their true nature-indeed, their very existence may be said to have been almost entirely disregarded by the public, and too frequently overlooked by professional magicians. The prevalent idea is that the secrets of magic consist in tricks and dodges, connected with the manipulations and the apparatus employed in the art. To most people, the "secret" of any magical presentation means simply "how it is done." It is assumed that, when once the devices used in producing a magical effort have been discovered, the 'secret' of that effect is revealed. The trick has been found out, and therefore nothing remains to be learned. A more erroneous view has never been conceived. Not only so, it is a view that cannot be justified on any rational ground, as we propose to show in the following pages.

The real secrets of magic are not merely trade secrets. They are not workshop devices, connected with manipulation and mechanism. They are not ingenious dodges which, when learned, enable their possessor to accomplish all that a skilled magician can do. They are not tricks and puzzles devised for the bewilderment of the public. Far from it. They are of an order far higher than elementary matters of that description, and far removed from the popular conception of their nature. Our present object is to disclose these secrets-to explain the real basis of the magic art, and the principles upon which magical effects actually depend. In short, we intend to show not only the tricks which magicians use, but also the essential factors which underlie the whole art and practice of magic. It will be found that, so far from being bound up in jugglery and paraphernalia, the true art in magic is purely intellectual in character, and comprises an infinitely varied range of interest.

It is essential in the first place that a just conception be formed of the scope and intention of this present section of our work. "The Art in Magic" is a very different thing from "The Art of Magic." The latter term may embrace an immense number of diverse considerations. The former relates to one side only of magic; a side which has never received the attention it deserves. Our immediate aim is the elucidation of those fundamental principles which, being reduced to practice, justify the claim of magic to be classed among the Arts-not, of course, among the mechanical arts, but among the Fine Arts-the Arts with a big A. We wish to demonstrate the causes which, irrespective of technical skill and knowledge, determine the relative success or failure of individual aspirants to fame in pursuit of our art. It is evident that such matters are well worthy of consideration by every magician-even one of the most practical, or most commercial type. Indeed, it may be said, with some show of reason, that the man who cannot explain the principles involved in such questions as these, cannot claim to understand the inwardness of the magic art. It is that inwardness which governs a performer's ultimate success or failure. Therefore, it must be well to investigate the actual agencies which dominate the successful practice of magic.

This we shall now attempt, to the best of our ability. In doing so, however, we must direct the reader's attention to things which do not lie upon the surface of our subject. We must deal with points which are not exactly obvious to the man who, for the first time, looks into a book dealing with magic. We must, for the moment, lose sight of such details as "sleights" and "fakes," and confine our attention to broad principles which, superficially, may seem to be mere abstractions, of no especial importance to practical men. But, as we proceed, we hope to show by means of practical illustrations the really important nature of the matters we are discussing.

We presume that everyone will agree to the recognition of magic as an art. As a matter of fact, magic embodies both art and science. Ordinarily, the phrase "the art of magic" is used as including everything that relates to the subject, from any point of view whatever. Therefore, since our present inquiry relates only to the art side of magic, and has no concern with its science, we have been careful to choose for this section a title which avoids the loose terminology commonly employed. Then, magic being admittedly an art, let us investigate the real nature of the Art in Magic; for, upon that investigation depends the disclosure of the real secrets of magic.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER II

THE THREE DEGREES IN ART

HERE we come into contact with a difficulty which has taxed the powers of many great minds to the utmost. Before we can talk sensibly about "Art" of any kind, we must first define the true meaning of that term. We must decide what, in our opinion, art really is. Fortunately in this instance, we are not in danger of encountering the obstacle that so many able intellects have failed to overcome. We are not called upon to define the meaning of art in the abstract. We have only to define what is meant by "Art in Magic." To that end, we may evoke the aid of both authority and common sense.

It was, we believe, Robert-Houdin who said that a conjurer is in reality "an actor playing the part of a magician." There is only one fault in that statement. He should have said "a *great* conjurer." Because, as we all know, there are many conjurers who only play the part of some other conjurer. That, however, is a matter with which we shall deal forcibly later on. For the present, we shall accept the broad principle expressed in Robert-Houdin's definition of a conjurer. That definition may not be--and is not--accurate in relation to what a conjurer always is; but, beyond doubt, it is accurate in the sense of defining what a conjurer always *should be*. A real modern magician, then, is essentially an actor. He *must* be so, or as the sole alternative he must be a duffer. Both authority and common sense unite in compelling us to that conclusion. To all intents and purposes, the real art of the magician is identical with that of the actor. The magician's methods, of course, are widely different from those of the actor; but, whatever difference there may be in method, the principles involved are identical in both cases.

From the time of Aristotle to the present date, the consensus of authorities has decided that all art is based upon imitation. Most of the authorities have "flown off the handle," in trying to decide what constitutes art in the abstract; but all agree that the basis of art is imitation--either the imitation of something that actually *exists*, or of something that *might* exist in circumstances imagined by the artist. With this knowledge in our possession and fortified by the exercise of our own judgment, we realize the fact that a display of skill given by a magical performer should imitate, and thus convey to the spectators, the impression of effects produced by supernormal powers. Herein, we may justly say that we stand upon sure ground and here we may

rest, so far as primary considerations are concerned. We have no need to be led out of our depth by trying to define that will-o'-the-wisp, "abstract art."

Now, artistic judgment may, to a great extent, be gained by study and experience. Similarly, physical adaptation may be developed by early and systematic training. And the acquisition of either of those essentials may be considerably facilitated by means of accurate knowledge. Such knowledge may be either theoretical or practical; but of the two the theoretical must, in the long run, prove to be the more valuable. It necessarily conducts the student to the bedrock of his subject; whereas the study of practical details only leads to a knowledge of isolated facts. By means of the latter form of study, the student may learn what to do in order to produce certain effects. But, however much attention he may devote to the acquisition of that detailed knowledge, he will never ascertain therefrom the reasons which underlie the processes he employs. He will only learn the "how" of his work; the "why" will remain obscure. In short, he will never really understand his business. Everything he does will be done blindly. Every new departure he endeavors to make must be subject to conclusions arrived at by means of "trial and error." Any little variation upon his usual practice will represent a subject of extreme doubt. He can only *think* that what he proposes to do will produce the result he desires. He can never *know* what he is doing, because he does not understand why the things he does are successful.

On the other hand, the man who has gained a knowledge of the broad principles which constitute the foundation of the art side of magic must necessarily possess a great advantage, in such circumstances. He knows the reason why each effect he has already produced has been successful. He can follow the manner in which each of his previous devices has operated, in influencing the minds of spectators. Similarly, from his knowledge of basic principles, he will be able to deduce the proper manner of presentation and the probable effect of any new conception. The same principles which govern what he has already done also govern what he is about to do. Therefore, being acquainted with the "why" of the matter, he is not afflicted by doubts concerning the "how." Putting the whole thing in a nutshell, it simply comes to this--the man not only knows his business; he also understands it. He knows the technique, and understands the art. As to the great value--and the commercial value--of the understanding, we think, there can exist no possible doubt.

As already stated, there is a kind of art which imitates things imagined by the artist. There is another kind of art which imitates things that actually exist. There is also a third kind--that which imitates neither things imagined by the imitator, nor things that exist; but merely imitates the imitations of others. These three varieties may, respectively, be described as High Art, Normal Art, and False Art.

We now turn our attention to the systematic discussion of the three phases of art thus defined, and endeavor to arrive at sound conclusions thereon in relation to the Art in Magic.

The subject of false art in magic, when rationally investigated, presents no difficulties, in the way of either doubt or obscurity. In magic, as elsewhere, false art is

the art which imitates art. It is an imitation of an imitation. An illustration of this may be given by means of a familiar analogy in connection with painting. Pictures painted by the great masters are frequently reproduced by students and by professional copyists. Many of the copies thus executed are, in all practical respects, facsimiles of the original pictures from which they were copied. Yet nobody, in his sober senses, could possibly regard those copies, however faithful they may be, as works of true art. We have all seen copies of invaluable masterpieces offered for sale. We have all noted the insignificant price at which such copies are sold. We have all been struck by the small value of the copies as compared with their originals, the latter being very often so precious that money could not buy them. The reason for this discrepancy is obvious. The originals are works of high art. The copies are works of false art; except, of course, that they have the merit of honesty. They are admittedly nothing more than copies.

As in painting, so also in magic. To produce a magical effect of original conception is a work of high art. It imitates the exercise of magical powers, by means and in a manner conceived by the artist who produced it. To reproduce a magical effect, exactly as already conceived and executed by an artist in magic, is false art. It merely imitates the original imitation; and, in actual value, is just as worthless as a painting copied from another painting. Any weakling may be taught how to do that kind of thing; and, having learned his lesson, may earn an income equivalent to the value of a weakling's work.

Yet, in spite of the truth of the foregoing statements, many of those who practise magic, either as a means of livelihood or as an intellectual recreation, appear to be entirely ignorant of the very existence of facts such as those we have reviewed. In all probability, those men would feel highly offended were any doubt cast upon their claim to be regarded as artists. Yet, in all they do, they prove themselves to be mere mechanics. They can do just what somebody else has already done-and they can do nothing more. Such men are not artists. They cannot be; since, in all their works, the only kind of art displayed is the false art, which is an imitation of real art.

The class of man above indicated represents a type that must be very familiar to all. The methods adopted by such men are of common knowledge. Suppose, for instance, Mr. Artist produces a novel and successful effect. No sooner has he done so than Mr. Copyist becomes on the alert, and forthwith proceeds to haunt the place wherein Mr. Artist's performances are given. By means of persistent observation, aided perhaps by accident, by means of purchase from some other imitator, or, it may be, by means of bribery and corruption, Mr. Copyist eventually acquires the knowledge and equipment requisite for the reproduction of the novel effect. That end having been attained, one might think that Mr. Copyist would need to gain nothing, more at Mr. Artist's expense. Generally, however, that is far from being the case. Although he has become possessed of the technical requirements connected with the effect he seeks to reproduce, Mr. Copyist even, then is not content to take off his coat and do a little meritorious work. Having got what he wanted in order A to reproduce the effect, he might surely be expected to, infuse some spice of originality into his reproduction. But, no! He will not trouble himself even to that slight extent. He does not mind

expending his time in gathering the crumbs that fall from another's table; but he has a rooted objection to expending energy in making his own bread. So he continues to attend Mr. Artist's performances until, in the course of time, he has learned by heart every word Mr. Artist says, every inflection of Mr. Artist's voice, and every movement and gesture Mr. Artist makes. Then, and then only, is Mr. Copyist prepared to set to work on his own account. And when his reproduction is exhibited, what is it? Generally speaking, it is but a pale reflection of the original work of art. At the best, it is merely slavish imitation; and, as such, has no artistic value.

On several occasions, we have made an experiment which is always interesting. That experiment has been tried upon copyists, clinging to the skirts of various arts, including magic. It consists in saying to Mr. Copyist, at the conclusion of his performance, "I had only to close my eyes, and I could almost have believed it was Mr. Artist who was performing." Thereupon, Mr. Copyist has, invariably, assumed an expression of smug satisfaction, and has given thanks for the great compliment (?) paid him! If he could only have realized what was passing in the mind of the person to whom his thanks were addressed -but, there! his mental caliber, of course, forbids any such exercise of intelligence. Yet, one cannot help coveting the blissful ignorance and the sublime impudence which enable such a man to pose as an artist. The possession of an intellect so obtuse, and a hide so pachydermatous, must confer upon the possessor a degree of self-satisfaction unknown to men of real ability.

Some may possibly think we have been too severe upon Mr. Copyist. It must be remembered, however, that no useful purpose can be served by mincing matters, when endeavoring to uphold any just cause. If magic is to be raised to its proper level among the fine arts, one must not withhold the statement of any truth, however disagreeable it may be, that may help to drive home the essential points which distinguish real Art in Magic from the false art so often met with in the practice of magic.

Leaving for the present the subject of False Art, we shall proceed to the more agreeable considerations connected with True Art in Magic. Of this, as we have already seen, there are two kinds-Normal Art and High Art. Those definitions, of course, do not represent qualities that are capable of hard-and-fast classification. In the nature of things, that is impossible. The range of art, from its highest grade to its lowest, includes every possible degree of merit. Except in general terms, one cannot say that, within such and such limits, Normal Art is contained and, beyond those limits, we have on the one hand High Art, and on the other False Art. There is an almost imperceptible gradation throughout the entire scale, between each particular degree and those adjoining it. One can only generalize, when dealing with the principles of any form of art; and, speaking broadly, say that High Art is situated near to the top of the scale, Normal Art near the middle, and False Art near the lower end. It is the normal or average degree-approximating to the central position of the scale-that next claims our attention.

When discussing False Art in Magic, we had no difficulty in providing a definition of its nature. When we say that False Art is the art which imitates art, we are merely

stating a truism, and one that is applicable to all arts alike. But when we proceed to define Normal Art in Magic, we find the task somewhat more difficult. In painting, for example, it is easy enough and accurate enough to say that Normal Art is the art which imitates nature. We can all understand that the normal artist, in painting, is he who transfers to his canvas a transcript of what he himself has seen in nature. In nature, however, there is no magic, because the very essence of magic is that it apparently sets the laws of nature at defiance. "Natural Magic" is really a contradiction in terms. It may mean almost anything, according to the sense in which it is used. Therefore, apart from art of some kind, magic has no existence. Hence, the point is, how can the normal artist in magic reproduce the normal effects associated with magic, without at once becoming a false artist—one who imitates art? It is a very pretty question, involving an interesting problem. The answer to that question, and the solution of that problem, cannot fail to provide a valuable mental exercise for all magicians who respect their profession and value their art.

At first glance, it may appear that, at this stage of our investigation, we have encountered a difficulty of considerable magnitude; or possibly an insurmountable obstacle. A very little reflection, however, will show that such is by no means the case. The difficulty is more apparent than real. The principles which govern the normal practice of other arts will be found, absolutely, of equal validity in the Art in Magic. This may readily be demonstrated by amplifying the analogy, already employed, between magic and painting.

In painting, the normal artist makes a picture, representing some thing or a combination of many things, that will reproduce the effect of actually looking upon the work of nature. He does not create anything; he merely imitates things, which already exist, on canvas. The things he paints resemble, more or less, things which others have painted. As a rule, such resemblances, in normal art, are inevitable. The important point, however, is that the things he paints do not imitate paintings made by others. The various things which enter into the composition of his picture are the common property of every artist. Everyone is at liberty to combine those details, in any manner he may think fit, to produce whatever effect he chooses. But, so soon as any painter copies a particular combination, or a particular treatment of such details, as represented in the work of another, so soon will his work be reduced to the level of false art. Now, in view of these self-evident facts, the difficulty of defining the nature of Normal Art in Magic becomes reduced to very small dimensions. In fact, one can scarcely say that any difficulty exists.

Just as the average painter has at hand innumerable details of subject and technique, all of which are common property, so has the average magician a wide selection of materials which, in common with all his fellow-artists, he is at liberty to use. Just as the painter uses familiar methods and stock subjects for the production of his pictures, so does the magician use methods and subjects which have a similar relation to his own special art. In either case, the chief characteristic which distinguishes Normal Art from False Art consists in the fact that the former relies upon personal ability, while the latter sponges upon the ability of others. That is perfectly clear.

There need be no hesitation in giving a definition of what constitutes Normal Art in Magic. Obviously, it is the art which employs familiar means to produce its own especial results. Normal Art of every kind, when reduced to its true basis, consists in that and nothing more. Certain subjects and certain methods are common property. The normal artist utilizes those subjects and methods, without copying anyone else. That is to say, the difference between the essentially false and the essentially true, in any art, lies in the respective absence or presence of original effort. One may be a true artist without possessing creative genius. Individual skill in adaptation will suffice. But no true artist can ever be made from material contained in a mere copyist. On the other hand, however, a normal artist may only too readily degenerate into a copyist, unless he is careful to keep in view the duty he owes both to his art and to himself.

Upon such points, the man who, even in a very minor degree, possesses the true artistic temperament, cannot help feeling and speaking strongly. He who seeks to acquire or to retain the social position assigned to an artist, can never lose sight of the maxim "*Noblesse oblige*." He is perforce compelled to avoid many practices which, if employed in commerce, would be perfectly justifiable. He who employs the tradesman's methods must be content to remain a tradesman. His ultimate aim consists in the making of money; a thing with which art has no concern. It is true that, in art, even more profit may often be made than in trade; but whatever profit may incidentally accrue to the artist, his ultimate aim is far higher than matters relating to finance. He has, of course, every reason for studying his own interests. Nobody can blame him for that; nor, indeed, can do otherwise than approve his prudence. But, at all times, the interests of his art are paramount. Should there arise an occasion when an artist finds self-interest opposed to the interests of art, he must be prepared to sacrifice profit upon the altar of duty. If he cannot do that, he is no true artist. Let him, then, come down from his pedestal, and take his place among workaday humanity. In doing so, he will suffer no disgrace; but, on the contrary, he will deserve honor. By ridding himself of an unwarrantable assumption of artistic merit, he will be absolved from the guilt of false-pretense.

In magic, then, the normal artist is he who takes materials which are the common property of all who practise his art, and utilizes those materials for his own particular ends. His general purpose, of course, like that of all magicians, is the simulation of supernatural effects. And, in the achievement of that purpose, the work done by the normal artist in magic will fall within one of three categories, which may be outlined as follows:

1. The use of familiar methods, in a familiar combination, to produce a familiar effect, but *with some originality in presentation*.
2. The use of familiar methods, *in a novel form of combination*, to produce a familiar effect, the manner of presentation displaying some originality.
3. The use of familiar methods, in any form of combination, to produce *a novel effect*, the presentation of which must necessarily possess more or less originality.

Everything which is not contained in those three very extensive categories must be

something which is either greater or less than Normal Art in Magic. It must approximate either to False Art at one extreme, or to High Art at the other.

In our Normal Art, as already defined, it will be noted that every department possesses one characteristic that is common to all, viz., originality of presentation. And, having carried our investigation thus far, we are able to see that, without the saving grace of original presentation, a magician's work must necessarily degenerate into False Art. The extent of such degeneration will be exactly commensurate with the degree to which that work imitates the work of other magicians. In other words, the degeneration is proportionate to the imitation of art. The very moment we detect the existence of art which imitates art, we know we are face to face with falsity, more or less pronounced. On that point we need have no fear of being mistaken. Knowing what we know, our estimate of a magician's merit will be governed mainly by this particular consideration. When we recognize the presence of False Art, we prepare ourselves to estimate the depth to which the magician will sink. When we note the absence of False Art, we prepare to observe the height to which the magician will rise. Therein we instinctively act upon the dictates of common sense and common justice.

Turning to the other extreme, however, we find that our Normal Art presents a very wide field for expansion, and is capable of attaining a very high level of merit. Indeed, it may be raised to a level which approximates very closely to High Art; so closely, in fact, that it encroaches upon the hinterland dividing the two higher sections of art. In this respect, everything depends upon the amount of original accomplishment displayed. The essential truth of this latter statement will become more apparent when we proceed to discuss the actual characteristics of High Art in Magic.

We must never lose sight of the fact that in magic, as in all intellectual occupations, Normal Art is by far the most important department. High Art is a sporadic and accidental development that may be productive of beneficial influences, if only it can secure due appreciation. In any event, however, its influence can never be otherwise than for the good. False Art is a parasitic growth that can only be productive of evil, and should never be permitted to live. Between the two there lies Normal Art, which includes the vast bulk of magical representations, and upon the elevation of which all true progress depends. It is useless to point out the merits exhibited by the work of this or that exponent, and say--"See how high a level magic has attained!" It is unjust to quote the doings of certain so-called "artists," and say--"See the depths to which magic has become degraded!" The true status of magic, as an art, can only be ascertained by means of evidence derived from the work of accredited Normal Artists. The more nearly our Normal Art, as a whole, can be made to approach the status of High Art, the greater will be the elevation attained by magic. The more nearly our Normal Art approximates to False Art, the lower must the whole art of magic sink. These statements admit of no dispute, as any man of ordinary intelligence can perceive. By our Normal Art, we must either stand or fall. There is no help for it. If Normal Art becomes debased, no individual genius can save it. If Normal Art is represented by men who respect their art, no charlatan, however notorious, can ever

degrade it.

The future of our art, then, rests with the Normal Artist. Upon him depends the ultimate development of magic. If he is not true to his art, the false artist will in the end reign supreme. In such circumstances, magic must relinquish all hope of attaining a position among the Fine Arts. It must be relegated to the position of a mechanical art--an *inferior* mechanical art--lower even than that of a circus juggler.

This is obvious, because, from the standpoint of mechanical art, the juggler's attainments are far higher than those of a magician. The latter can only take a higher place by realizing that he has to depend for success upon his brains, rather than upon his hands. In manipulative skill, he is hopelessly outclassed by the juggler. The amount of practice and physical training he requires cannot in any way be compared with that which is needed by the juggler. If, therefore, the Normal Artist in magic insists upon regarding his art as a mere congeries of mechanical accomplishments, he must be content to occupy a position inferior to that of a skilled mechanic.

The question of manipulative skill, as considered in relation to the respective accomplishments of the conjurer, the juggler and the artificer, may be put in a nutshell. Where the conjurer requires weeks of practice, the juggler requires months. And where the juggler requires months of practice, the skilled mechanic requires years. This is written, remember, by men who know what they are talking about--who are familiar with the three kinds of training in question. Mere opinion does not enter into the matter at all. As a mechanical art (*i.e.*, as a form of manipulative skill), magic occupies a very low position indeed. Only as an intellectual pursuit can it claim to be regarded as an art.

At times we have conversed with conjurers, professional and amateur, who have become momentarily enamored of some original or newly-introduced manipulation. In such cases, it is singularly interesting to note the attitude of mind displayed by the enthusiast. He is proud of his attainment as though it were an infant prodigy of whom he was the parent. He speaks of it in rapturous terms, as though it represented the highest achievement of which the magic art is capable. And no doubt if he were questioned on the point he would say that, in his opinion, the production of such ingenious devices must be regarded as the high-water mark of Art in Magic. When, however, we apply to such matters the touchstone of actual knowledge, we have no difficulty in seeing that the judgment proceed by our enthusiast is wildly wide of the mark. Greater folly, noun indeed, could hardly be put into words. To say that any mere manipulation can possibly be regarded as a work of High Art, is to sound the depths of absurdity. Manipulative processes are only one small

very portion of the means whereby the purposes of art are served. They are useful--indeed they are indispensable. But so are the brushes of the painter, and the chisels of the sculptor. In the work of an artist, mere handicraft has a value very little higher than that of the utensils employed therein. The only adjunct to which pride of place may be assigned is the artistic brain which conceives and directs the purposes of handicraft and utensils alike.

To complete the preliminary stage of our investigation, we shall now discuss the essential features of High Art in Magic. As in previous instances, we must first define precisely what we mean by the term "High Art" and ascertain what it is that, provably, constitutes the quality in question.

Herein we are confronted by no shadow of difficulty, either in connection with general principles or with specific details. High Art in Magic is, in every essential, the counterpart of High Art in other callings. It is that which originates and executes truly artistic conceptions. It represents the most complete triumph of mind over matter. It exists only in its power to create, but its creations are, humanly speaking, imperishable. As Shakespeare says:

"Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme."

--*Sonnet LV.*

Those words are applicable, in principle, to High Art of every kind. When, for instance, we review the history of magic, we cannot fail to recognize the inherent immortality of those works which have possessed the qualities essential to High Art. The work of the magician, like that of the actor, is among the ephemera of civilization. The magician himself leaves behind him very little beyond a name. Yet how great is the intrinsic value of that little, reckoned in hard cash. Its extrinsic value is, at the same time, immeasurable. In the bare records handed down to us in the history of magic, an immensity of progress and a wealth of honestly artistic accomplishment are epitomized. Those who know the vast amount of hammering that has to be done before even the faintest echo of their work is heard by others, can read between the written lines and fill in the blank spaces of history. Thus they are able to appreciate the achievements of their predecessors, with some approach to accuracy.

When, from the vantage point of knowledge and experience, we review the history of magic, we instinctively realize that the achievements which *live* are those which truly possess the character of High Art. They are the works of creative genius--the works of Master Magicians, whose mastery was due to an innate sense of the principles which underlie true art. Dispossessed of that sense, those men would never have occupied the place in history which now is theirs by right.

The degree to which their work was dominated by artistic principles is evident to anyone who undertakes a dispassionate study of the matter.

If we bring an open mind to bear upon the achievements of Past Masters in Magic, and compare the purely technical merit of those works with that displayed in other branches of invention, the comparison thus instituted is very far from being favorable to magic. On the contrary, it shows magic in a very poor light. Regarded in that light, magic appears to consist merely in a series of second-rate mechanical devices and childish simple processes. Such is the actual fact, beyond all possibility of dispute. Hence the obvious folly, as already stated, of imagining that the Art of Magic is represented by sleights" and "fakes." Such devices only constitute a branch--a very insignificant branch--of mechanical handicraft, and nothing more. To regard the Art of

Magic in so unworthy a light is a serious blunder-proverbially worse than a crime. The art we profess is not contained in the mere devices we employ, nor does the history of our art consist in a catalog of the devices handed down to us. If, in magic, such things were all that could be claimed, this book could never have been written. If matters of pure *technique*--mere handicraft--were all we had to discuss, the phrase "Art in Magic" would represent a solecism of the first water. Fortunately for us, however, magic occupies a far higher plane than that of the actual means it employs. Such is the case in every art; for art of any kind can only begin where processes end. As grammar is to literature, or versification to poetry, so are sleights and fakes to magic. Such things are the *means*, not the *end* of art. In other arts, this fact is clearly understood and appreciated; but in magic neither the literature nor the general practice of the art has so far shown any indication of a true understanding of this most vital question. Surely it is our bounded duty to do our utmost toward correcting this lamentable defect. When that correction has been duly made--and not until then--magic will attain the position among fine arts to which it is justly entitled. To return, however, to the history of magic, there is one obvious question that arises. In view of what has already been said, wherein lies the true merit--the High Art--of the classic productions handed down to us? That question is easily answered. And, still more easily, can we say wherein the true merit of those productions does not consist. For example, it does not consist in, the inventive ability, as ordinarily understood, of the old masters. It does not consist in the mechanical ingenuity they displayed. It does not consist in the manipulative skill at their command. It does not consist in the theoretical knowledge they possessed, nor in the practical experience they gained. Such elementary matters barely touch the fringe of true art. Thus, by the simple process of exclusion, we arrive at the only possible answer. The true merit of the masterpieces in question consists in the originality they display, and the perfection with which they simulate the operation of supernatural influences. The honors gained by Master Magicians have been due to a genius for conceiving and fulfilling the requirements of artistic originality. In every art, the Master is he who can produce original effects, and understands how to present them in an original and convincing manner.

Thus there are three elementary facts which are well worthy of remembrance. Without thorough knowledge, no man can become a true artist. Without honorable ambition, no man can become a high artist. And without originality no man can become a great artist. Of course, we cannot all attain the greatness to which the Master Magicians are so worthily entitled. We cannot all hope to become exponents of the highest art in magic. But we can all, at least, try to do so, and in proportion to our united efforts in this direction, we shall raise the status of magic as an art.

In this connection we may advantageously bear in mind the words written centuries ago by Sir Philip Sidney:

"Who shootes at the mid-day sonne, though he be sure he shall never hit the marke, yet as sure he is he shall shoote higher than who aymes but at a bush."

That kind of "shootynge" represents a perfect analogy to the methods of High Art.

The actual end can never be attained; but, nevertheless, every true artist will endeavor to approach it as nearly as his natural abilities will permit. The heights we reach are all that may be counted to us for righteousness. A lifetime of effort, upon one dead level, is of less value than a single step toward higher aims. And at the same time every artist knows that, whatever may be the height he attains, his successors will go higher still. He has builded upon foundations laid by others, and others in turn will build upon the foundations he has laid. He can only say to posterity, in Kipling's words:

"After me cometh a Builder. Tell him, I too have known."*

* "The Five Nations," p. 66.

Having made ourselves acquainted with certain fundamental truths, we may now pass on to the consideration of specific principles. Our best course, undoubtedly, will be to investigate various important qualities associated with the art of magic; and thus deduce certain rules, whereby the production of artistic results may be facilitated.

Here, however, we must be careful to avoid falling into a very common error. We must not be drawn into a belief that, in art of any kind, there is or can be any specific rule which may not be set aside upon occasion. Cast-iron regulations are antagonistic to every form of art. It is impossible to give recipes whereby the creation of artistic effects may be assured. It is only possible to lay down rules for the avoidance of certain ascertained defects, and even such rules are not capable of rigid observance at all times. Their operation is controlled by attendant circumstances; and, in order to use them to full advantage, their scope and meaning must be fully understood. At the same time, there is one general rule whereby at all times our procedure may be governed. That rule may be stated as follows:

(1) Never set aside any accepted rule, unless it is absolutely necessary to do so for some clearly defined reason.

The application of this rule will become increasing evident as we proceed with our investigation. For the present it will suffice to say that when we have reasoned out and formulated a logical conclusion, that conclusion should be adhered to so far as may be possible. Thus, when no valid reason can be given for breaking an accepted rule, the latter should be obeyed. With this preamble, we may proceed to the detailed inquiry we have in view, treating each particular quality of art under its own separate heading.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic

by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER III

UNITY

IN ALL probability, the quality to which the term "unity" is applied, is the most important factor in relation to every form of art. At any rate, we may safely say there is no quality of greater importance. As in other arts, so in magic, unity is a first essential to success; since, without it, artistic results are impossible. This has been understood and accepted since the earliest days of art. For example, centuries before the Christian Era, Aristotle wrote, concerning the Greek Drama:

"As, therefore, in other mimetic arts, one imitation is an imitation of one thing, so here the fable, being an imitation of an action, should be an imitation that is one and entire; the parts of it being so connected that, if any one of them be either transposed or taken away, the whole will be destroyed or changed. For whatever may be either retained or omitted, without making any sensible difference, is not properly a part.--Poetics, Part II, Chap. V.

If, for the word "fable" we substitute the words "magical feat" or other equivalent term, the foregoing paragraph will become as appropriate to the Art of Magic as it now is to Dramatic Art. But, since we are engaged upon an independent inquiry, we must not be content to accept, without proof, the mere pronouncement of any authority, however eminent. It is necessary to make sure of our ground as we proceed, and to obtain all reasonable proof that the conclusions we adopt are well founded. Let us, then, review the facts systematically; and, in the light of knowledge thus gained, form our own conclusions as to the characteristics and importance of unity.

At the outset, for very obvious reasons, we may discard the mass of proverbial nonsense which has crystallized around the idea of singleness of purpose and action. Such matters as the impossibility of doing properly two things at once--of being in two places at one time (with particular reference to Sir Boyle Roche's bird)--of facing both ways simultaneously, and so forth, such matters may be set aside entirely. Mere impossibility is a consideration which in magic has no weight whatever. The essence of the art consists in apparently accomplishing things which are impossible. What we are concerned with just now is the expediency of presenting each magical item in the form of a

harmonious whole, and of avoiding everything in the nature of incompleteness or discontinuity. Therein lies the true conception of artistic unity.

"One imitation," as stated in the quotation given above, "is an imitation of one thing." That is obviously true. And one magical act, as presented to an audience, should constitute an imitation of one apparently supernormal feat, culminating in one apparently miraculous effect. We have only to reflect for a moment to realize the fact that, in order to obtain a perfect effect, the only possible course is to rivet the attention of the audience upon one continuous chain of events, which will lead up to one definite and impressive result.

In this connection, it is necessary to remember that an audience is not amenable to compulsion, and cannot be relied upon to make any serious mental effort. Spectators attending a magical performance have no idea of exerting themselves, either mentally or physically, for the performer's benefit. Why should they? They are there to be amused, and for no other purpose. The exertion of following and remembering details which involve any element of complexity, or of trying to understand any matter which exhibits a mere trace of obscurity, is a thing which no magician has a right to demand of his audience. His spectators very justly expect that everything connected with the entertainment will be so presented as to be readily understood. Hence, it is important that, as a matter of ordinary practice, each presentation shall consist in an unbroken sequence of events. Here, for the moment, we may pause, to set down a valuable and well-understood rule:

(2) *Always endeavor to form an accurate conception of the point of view most likely to be adopted by a disinterested spectator.* For a performer to put himself in the place of his audience requires the exercise of an amount of imagination and—may we say it?—of judgment, rarely met with among those who are otherwise qualified to entertain the public. Yet, the more completely a magician can obey this rule, the greater will be his chances of success. The task before him is gigantic—but he should attempt it nevertheless. He must try to forget the importance of things which appeal to him most strongly, because, for all the public knows or cares, those things might as well be nonexistent. The difficulty of his manipulations; the ingenuity and originality of his inventions; the refinements and improvements he has introduced; and, above all, the distinctive merits personal to himself, should be disregarded. All such matters should be lost to sight, in order that the one supreme consideration may not become obscured, even for a moment. The effect to be made upon his audience is the one thing a magician should keep in view, as the Americans say, "first, last, and all the time."

The *effect*--and, bear in mind, the effect upon an audience—that is the sole issue at stake. At the moment of presentation, that is the only thing which matters. In all the wide world, so far as the audience is concerned, there is no other consideration worth so much as a passing thought. Consequently, as a general proposition, it may be said that the greatest possible error any magician can ever have laid to his charge is that of "conjuring for conjurers" at a public performance. Such conjuring may be entirely admirable when the audience is composed of conjurers. But, before the general public,

it must be regarded as inartistic; for the simple reason that, in such circumstances, it is bound to fail in its effect. Between the point of view of a conjurer and that of an ordinary spectator there is a great gulf. Therefore, at a public performance, the production of an artistic effect may often demand the adoption of methods which, with an audience of conjurers, would be quite contrary to rational procedure.

Since the primary aim of a magician's art is to entertain the public, the importance of the following rule is self-evident:--

(3) Avoid complexity of Procedure, and never tax either the Patience or the memory of an audience.

The thing presented should appear to consist in a perfectly regular and natural series of operations; and, when the final effect is produced, it should be capable of instant appreciation. If its appreciation is made to depend upon any conscious mental activity or any effort of memory on the part of the audience, a proper effect can seldom be achieved. If, in order to understand precisely what has happened, the spectators have to reflect, even for a few moments, upon the various stages of procedure which led up to the denouement, it is certain that, from an artistic point of view, the presentation must be unsatisfactory. There must be a lack of unity, in some respect or other. By chance, the audience may happen to have retained an impression of the details relevant to the final issue; and if so the result may be fairly good. That, however, will be an accidental occurrence; and no true artist ever trusts to accident. The effect produced should be, as Pope says, "The result of Art, not Chance." In this connection, the following rule may be stated:--

(4) Never produce two simultaneous effects, and let no effect be obscured by any subsidiary distraction.

Suppose, for instance, a magician were presenting the familiar

"Four Ace Trick"; and, not being an artist, he thought to enhance the effect either by introducing irrelevant manipulations, or by arranging (say) that the disclosure of certain previously selected cards should occur simultaneously with, the discovery of the four aces. What would be the result? In either case, the preliminary operations would introduce an element of confusion, most detrimental to success; and in the second case the simultaneous production of two diverse effects would be absolutely fatal. Distracted by the effort to comprehend two problems at once, the audience would fail to appreciate the significance of either. There would be too much to remember, even if the spectators were prepared to exercise their memory.

Whereas, if the performer were an artist, he would know that the "trick," as usually presented, is complete and perfect. That is to say, it would be perfect if instead of the four aces, the four kings were used; the three palmed cards being knaves, which could be shown momentarily at the last deal. Nothing can be either added or omitted, without marring its effect. That is obviously true. For, taking the other extreme, if some "hustler" were to omit (say) the first dealing out of the cards and the business associated therewith, anyone with half an eye can see how much the final effect would

become degraded. There is, in fact, only one adequate manner of presenting the effect, for the simple reason that in no other way can the requirements of artistic unity be fulfilled. The imaginary examples cited are, of course, gross exaggerations of such faults as are likely to occur in practice. But the difference between the illustrations and possible fact is only one of degree, and not of kind. The principles involved are identical, in either case. The evident conclusion may be embodied thus:

(5) Let each magical act represent a complete, distinct, and separate entity; comprising nothing beyond one continuous chain of essential details, leading to one definite effect.

This rule, of course, must be read in conjunction with Rule 4, and requires to be properly understood. It does not imply that two events may not occur simultaneously. Very often, the entire effect of a magical presentation consists in the fact that two or more things happen at once. Nevertheless, the rule holds good; for, although there may be a plurality of occurrences, a single, complete, and undisturbed effect may thereby be produced.

By way of example, let us consider the details of "The Wine and Milk Trick." In this, three large glass vases are used. To begin with,

a bottle of wine is emptied into a vase, No. 1; a quart of milk is poured into vase NO. 2; vase NO- 3 remains empty. Vases 1 and 2 are next emptied into Vase NO. 3; the latter thus contains about half a gallon of wine and milk, mixed together, while the other two vases are empty. A flag is then taken up, and waved in the air. Immediately, the wine returns to vase No. 1; the milk goes back into No. 2; and the flag passes into No. 3, from which the liquid mixture has now taken flight. Thus, three events occur at the same moment. Yet there is only one single *effect* produced. And why? Because the very essence of the feat is the simultaneous occurrence of those three events. Those three changes are mutually related and interdependent, each being the complement of the other two. Such a feat involves no contravention of Rules 4 and 5. If, however, it culminated in three simultaneous and *independent* occurrences, there would occur three simultaneous, and therefore mutually destructive effects. Consequently, in such circumstances, there would be practically no residue of combined effect worth mentioning.

Then again, an effect of this kind compels us to realize the importance of completeness in presentation, and also impresses upon us the extreme cogency of Rule 3, concerning the avoidance of complexity. If the thing is not presented in such a way that the presentation is rendered complete in every respect, the audience will not understand it. Unless everything is made perfectly clear-nothing being omitted which, in any way, will help the audience to a true idea of the problem to be solved-the effect will fall flat, nine times out of ten. Without completeness in all essential details of word and action, the mere fact that three changes occur together will so confuse an average audience that, in all probability, the real merit of the effect will not be perceived until some hours after the performance is over. Spectators, having gone home and had time to think about the matter, will realize that after all the thing was

much better than they thought at the time. That, of course, is all right in its way: But so far as the success of an entertainment is concerned, nothing short of immediate appreciation is of any great value. And for the purposes of art, anything which is not immediately convincing is undoubtedly defective.

With reference to Rule 3, it is evident that complexity of procedure is as liable to produce a confused impression, as is a paucity of essential preliminaries. In the latter case, the audience does not receive sufficient information. In the former, the information conveyed is too voluminous. The audience cannot remember what has been said and done. In neither case can an adequate effect be obtained.

With all due respect to a magician's best friend--the average spectator--it is impossible to disguise the fact that, in matters such as those just mentioned, the occasional stupidity of audiences is beyond exaggeration. And with that fact every magician must be prepared to reckon. Therein, we are led to recognize the importance of Rule 2, concerning the spectator's point of view. It is not that the individual units of any audience are necessarily stupid. Far from it. The fact is merely that any gathering composed of average persons may, as a whole, readily develop a tendency toward inattention and lack of interest.

Many causes may contribute to the existence of that tendency; indeed, almost any accidental cause may suffice to produce serious distraction among most members of an audience. It may be that hundreds of people have paid their money, and have also suffered great inconvenience, in order to have the privilege of crowding together for the purpose of seeing what one has to show. The whole crowd is animated by an intense desire to lose sight of no single detail of the performance; and, for the time being, has no other aim in life. Yet let one person come in late, or let some unlucky attendant spill a few coppers on the floor, and the whole of that excited audience will leave off attending to the things they want, above all, to follow, and will devote their entire attention to that late comer or those lost halfpence.

That is the kind of tendency with which an entertainer must, at any time, be prepared to cope. Hot, oppressive or relaxing weather; any kind of political or national excitement; any person with a bad cough, an irritating laugh, or an inclination to chatter; the presence, even, of a lady wearing a peculiar head-dress, or of a man who ostentatiously reads a newspaper, to show the world he can afford to pay for an expensive seat merely to sit in it--all such matters provide sources of distraction, capable of inducing inattention and apparent indifference among members of an audience.

It is in such conditions that a magician's powers are liable to be taxed to the utmost. It is then he discovers the extent to which he is justified in calling himself an artist. In very adverse circumstances, of course, no man may hope to hold his audience completely. But, short of "battle, murder, and sudden death," or other violent disturbance among the spectators, a true artist will undoubtedly compel attention. If he cannot do that, he may be sure there is either something lacking in his performance, or it contains unnecessary details which cause distraction; that is to say,

his presentations, in some respect or other, are at variance with the principles of unity. He either omits something which ought to be introduced, or introduces something which ought to be omitted. Thus, the performance is marred by the existence of either insufficiency, complexity, or redundancy. Accordingly, the audience fails to understand what is shown; or, partially understanding, fails to appreciate.

Of course, if one chose to argue the question of unity on the lines of special-pleading, one might contend that, in many instances, the introduction of irrelevant matters may cause amusement; and also that the mere doing of two things at once may give evidence of great skill, whereby an audience may be greatly impressed. That is all very true. The man who, for instance, could play the cornet and violin together, would be very clever, and by some that cleverness would be highly appreciated. But such cleverness is not Art. Is there, now, any artist in the musical world who would, in his wildest dreams ever conceive the idea of attempting such a feat? No! it is unthinkable. And, what is true in the case of music is equally true in magic. Without artistic unity, mere cleverness can have but little value. It is that kind of thing which was condemned by Shakespeare, in the words:

"Though it make the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve; the censure of the which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theater of others."--*Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 2.

Although, for obvious reasons, a magician is bound to adapt his performance to the mental capacity of particular audiences, that fact does not at any time justify an entire disregard for artistic principles. Every audience, however uncultivated, has a certain range of appreciation. Therefore, however far an artist may have to stoop in order to reach the intelligence of his audience, he will always endeavor to maintain his work upon as high a plane as circumstances permit. Only by such means can the public be led to appreciate good work. Let them see the best often enough, and due appreciation is bound to follow sooner or later.

A true appreciation of meritorious work in magic will not probably become general just yet. The public, especially among its lower grades, has too few opportunities for comparing good work with bad. And even among the higher strata of society, magicians have every need to maintain their presentations at as high a level as possible. There is plenty of evidence to show that, unless sound and solid merit can be kept constantly in view, a retrograde movement is sure to occur. The majority of amusement seekers will certainly yield to the common propensity for acquiring an appreciation of work which is meretricious or showy.

This fact is amply substantiated in the persistent evidences supplied by modern theatrical entertainments. The decadence of Comic Opera, for instance, has reconciled the public to the inanities of Musical Comedy. Artistic appreciation has thus been replaced by an undue exaltation of mere cleverness. It is, of course, commonly supposed that this change has been brought about by the gradual development of a public demand, which Musical Comedy alone could supply. In one sense, admittedly, that view is correct. The demand *has* gradually arisen, and has been supplied. But it must be remembered that no possible event can occur without a sufficient cause.

Hence, it is obvious that the growth of a public sentiment cannot represent the primary cause of any circumstance whatever. There is something which *created* that public sentiment, and that something, whatever it may be, represents the actual cause to which the result in question must be referred.

In the case we are discussing, there can be no reasonable doubt that the decline of Comic Opera was the primary cause of the demand for Musical Comedy. The public turned to the latter simply because it was the best thing obtainable. People gradually drifted into an appreciation of its incoherences, because they had nothing better with which to compare it. Had not the supply of good Comic Opera been, as it were, cut off at the main, its substitute would never have been in demand. Fortunately, the present conditions cannot possibly be permanent. They have no solid foundation in art. They are based upon a mere fashion, which is bound to go the way of all fashions alike.

These interpolated remarks may appear to be somewhat beside the subject of magic. But since all arts are one in principle, the digression is useful. What has unfortunately happened in the case of musical entertainments may, only too readily, happen in connection with magic; unless, by consistent and conscientious effort on the part of magicians, a high level of artistic excellence is maintained prominently in public view.

Returning to our immediate subject, there is one point to which, before concluding our remarks upon unity, we must refer. Notwithstanding the obvious accuracy of the rules we have deduced--or, perhaps, we should say *because* of that accuracy--we must not forget that, in accordance with Rule 1, there may occur special instances, wherein even the most important laws of unity may be disregarded.

Such instances occur chiefly in connection with effects which result from the operation of cumulative processes; and, therefore, may be more appropriately discussed later on. We shall revert to this matter when dealing with such subjects as "Justification," "Surprise," and "Repetition."

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic

by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER IV

CONSISTENCY

IN ORDER of importance, the quality which probably ranks next to Unity is that of Consistency. Indeed, it may be said that, apart from consistency, unity cannot exist. Still, the subject is sufficiently well defined to warrant its separate consideration.

In relation to magic, the term "consistency" represents a quality which may be roughly described as propriety in necromantic details. It implies a general harmony of the various processes, actions, speeches, and appliances, with the scheme or mode of presentation with which they are associated. Its absence undoubtedly gives rise to sources of distraction; which, as we have seen, should be most carefully avoided, so far as may be possible.

Here again the importance of [Rule 2](#) is shown. Whatever details a performer may wish or require to introduce, these should all be subjected to most intent consideration, from a spectator's point of view. The supreme question must always be:---"What impression will the introduction of this detail produce upon the mind of an ordinary spectator?" No matter how agreeable or even necessary to the performer may be the inclusion of that detail, he should always endeavor to understand how it will strike his audience. Such understanding is by no means easy to acquire. It can come only with experience and constant practice. This is a case wherein it is impossible to "try it on the dog." The performer must, in the first instance, form his own conclusions. Nobody else can do much to help him in arriving at a decision. Above all, he must have the courage of his convictions, and must boldly take the course which his own reasoning faculties and his own experience dictate.

In saying this, of course, we are assuming that the performer understands the fundamental principles of his art, and is not just making a blind guess at the thing. The man who has no accurate knowledge (and who, therefore, works entirely in the dark) can scarcely be said to have the right to form any conclusion whatever. But when a magician understands his art, he should never allow his own reasoned convictions to be over-ruled by people who know little or nothing of the subject. Stated in a practical form, the point is this. Persons attending a rehearsal (whether they are employees, friends or what not) *can never represent a normal audience*. Their opinions can form no guide to the views of the average spectator. From the very circumstances of the

case, that is clearly impossible. Should any of those persons, however, have an amount of knowledge and experience comparable with that possessed by the performer, that person's opinion may be regarded as having some weight. But, even then, the performer must not be guided by mere opinion. He must demand adequate reason for any conclusion he may be urged to adopt. In short, given the possession of real knowledge, he himself must be the final arbiter of his own procedure. Once a presentation has been submitted to public criticism, it is easy enough to see wherein improvement is needed. And, as a matter of fact, there is always found some minor detail which requires modification. But in the hands of a true artist, no production ever needs serious revision after being presented to the public. That is one of the numerous directions wherein a true artist "scores."

Given sufficient time and unrestricted opportunity for public representation, anybody can eventually make his production a success; more or less qualified by repeated failure, in public, on previous occasions. That is to say, in the hands of a duffer, a "magical act" may be rendered presentable probably by the time it has become hopelessly discredited and, in the normal course of events, should be entirely worn out. The artist who knows "the rules of the game" and therefore understands how to make his productions approximately perfect in the first instance, certainly has an advantage, the value of which is very difficult to over-estimate.

In dealing with such questions, the performer can have no better guidance than that to be derived from the principles of consistency. And in all points of detail, one may be fairly confident that, if each action, process and so forth, is appropriate to the general scheme, and does not detract from the final effect, there is little fear of producing an undesirable impression. The general rule may be stated thus:

(6) Let every accessory and incidental detail be kept well "within the picture," and in harmony with the general impression which is intended to be conveyed.

For example, we shall suppose that the presentation is intended to convey the idea of a more or less serious reproduction of some legendary marvel, -say of a medieval English origin. In that case, everything said, done, and used, should harmonize with the ideas generally associated with that period in English history. So far as possible, everything should be archaeologically correct. Anachronisms should be studiously avoided. Allusions to modern times and modern incidents, phrases of modern origin, appliances of modern pattern, should all be rigidly excluded. The general "atmosphere" of the presentation should convey the idea of glancing backward through the pages of history and dwelling, in imagination, among scenes that have long since passed away.

That is obviously the rational course to pursue, in the case of a serious reproduction of medieval mysticism. When, however the intention is to give merely a humorous representation or parody of ancient tradition, the requirements are altogether different. In such circumstances, the more anachronisms one can introduce, the more inconsistencies of sentiment and usage one can perpetrate, the greater the contrasts of time and place one can suggest, the better will be the result. But even here the principles of consistency require to be observed. The presentation should be rendered

consistently inconsistent. The performer must not at one moment throw ridicule upon ancient ideas and methods and the next moment expect his audience to adopt a serious view of medieval magic. The spectators, of course, are always aware that the whole is "make-believe." They have to set aside their critical faculties in order to enter into the spirit of the thing. That, as a rule, they are perfectly willing to do, since all they want is to be entertained. They are ready to take any point of view the performer may suggest, and to imagine for the moment that the situation is precisely as the performer has stated. But having "made believe" to that extent, it cannot be imagined that they will be able suddenly to change their adopted point of view for another which is equally unsubstantial and entirely dissimilar, without having all their make-believe thrown to the winds and their critical faculties fully revived. No, in such a case the performer's previous efforts will have been wasted. The impression sought to be produced will be entirely destroyed, and the spectators will revert to the attitude of commonplace scepticism they began with. They will have to commence their mental adaptation once again, upon an entirely new basis, and with the memory of their recently checked self-deception fresh upon them. Any procedure of this kind can only result in confusion and loss of effect.

Conversely, if a purely modern conception is presented, consistency demands that all procedure and all adjuncts shall be entirely modern in character. Were the performer suddenly to depart from his normal procedure, for instance, and adopt the style of an ancient necromancer, he could never expect to be taken seriously. He would be laughed at openly by his audience if he entertained any such ridiculous notion. That kind of thing can only be done by way of burlesque.

There is, however, one very effective method of combining ancient legends with modern ideas, which, in addition to the proof it gives of the soundness of the principles of consistency, is extremely useful in aiding the modern magician to give his conceptions a definite application. This consists in the supposed introduction of ancient magical traditions into the actual affairs of modern life, and the suggestions that the magical theory had a foundation in fact. Usually, the procedure is somewhat as follows:

It is assumed that the magician has discovered some ancient charm, talisman, incantation, or spell, with which he decides or is caused to experiment. On doing so, he finds that apparently the legendary power attributed to the particular fetish in question are really genuine, and remain efficacious even in our own age of scepticism. The possibilities of magical and dramatic effect derivable from a situation of this kind are practically infinite. This is a fact which has long been understood and frequently utilized in literature. But, strange to say, this magical idea has not been developed to any great extent in connection with the art of magic itself. In plays such as "Niobe" and "The Brass Bottle," for example, this conception has provided a basis for valuable and artistic work. And in relation to magic, it presents facilities for introducing legitimate and convincing effects, which should by no means be neglected.

An illusionary presentation, conducted on such lines, may be rendered thoroughly satisfactory with very little difficulty. The effects produced being apparently

substantiated by the authority of early tradition, and the powers invoked having, as it were, descended from the age of miracles, all criticism as to sufficiency of cause is disarmed at once. The sceptical attitude common to modern thought becomes entirely out of place, and quite irrelevant to the issues involved. Material scepticism becomes subdued to the influences of that poetic and imaginative faculty which every man possesses, in a greater or less degree, no matter how uncompromising may be his professed antagonism to anything beyond the bounds of plain common sense.

In this connection, however, as in all matters relating to art, it is necessary to guard against the ever-present danger of allowing originality to be overshadowed by the attractions of blind imitation. Indeed, it is conceivable that what we have said on this present point, unless it is consistently read together with the context, may eventually create a serious hindrance to the progress of our art. There is every reason to fear that if one magician were to achieve a success with some particular development of this idea, that form of presentation would be generally regarded as the *essential* embodiment of the idea, from which no departure could be made. And, in answer to all criticisms, it would be said--"There is nothing to criticize. This is the very thing with which So-and-so has made so great a success."

Therein we find typified the common fault which hitherto has debased the practice of magic, and has helped to prevent the elevation of magic to the status of a fine art. Until that fault can be corrected until such slavish imitation of successful work becomes a matter for general and honest condemnation, we must be prepared to admit that after all is said and done, magic has not risen above the level of mere mechanical drudgery, the sort of work which is only undertaken by those who are incapable of doing anything better.

This must not be! In itself, magic is a profession which should yield pride of place to no other. It demands the highest abilities that humanity can bestow upon it. Magic will never-can never-debase its practitioners; but, unfortunately, history shows that too often magic has been debased by those who practise it.

On this point the first essential to be insisted upon is this: The very fact that So-and-so has made successful use of certain methods and devices should ordinarily suffice to prevent all other magicians from presenting anything which might be regarded as an imitation of So-and-so's work. If others can improve upon So-and-so's production, well and good. Let them exhibit their new devices, and show clearly wherein their improvements consist. All honor to them for so doing. But if all they have to present is a bad imitation of So-and-so's work, or merely something which appears almost as clever, let them keep such inferiorities to themselves. Or if they must needs exhibit their inferior productions, let them admit their own inferiority and give credit where credit is due.

It is quite possible that this idea of translating ancient conceptions into modern workaday life may become hackneyed. Should that occur, the magician who is a true artist would avoid that idea, as the devil is said to avoid holy water. When we find the majority of magicians actuated by such sentiments, we shall be in a position to assert,

without fear of contradiction, that magic is truly an art. Until then, we must admit that the artistic status of magic, however provable it may be, has not been proved. Magicians generally must be content to earn mere money-grubbing profits, instead of gaining the fame and fortune to which they should aspire by right of artistic merit.

Among the most important considerations relating to consistency, are those arising from the natural connection between cause and effect. In real life, every effect is produced by some appropriate and sufficient cause. We are aware that in saying this we merely repeat a childish self-evident platitude; but there are reasons. Since in real life every effect must have its cause, and every sufficient cause must produce its natural effect, similar conditions should prevail in the mimic world of the stage. Unfortunately, however, such is often very far from being the case. Too many persons appear to think that, because stage effects are necessarily artificial, the natural relationship between cause and effect can be disregarded upon the stage. Events are thus made to occur, without the slightest regard to attendant circumstances. The producer of an entertainment very commonly dictates the occurrence of an event, simply because he wants that event to happen and for no other reason whatever. He does not trouble himself as to whether or not, in the circumstances revealed, that event would naturally happen or might possibly happen. Not a bit of it! He wants that thing to happen, and for him that is reason enough. Consequently, that thing is made to happen, no matter how inconsistent with previous events its occurrence may be.

This is a fault which is extremely prevalent in modern stage productions of every class. It is none the less reprehensible on that account. On the contrary, the more often it is allowed to appear, the more culpable are those who permit such an obvious defect to exist in their presentations. Particularly so, because the fault is one that may be corrected with the utmost ease. Stage effects, being only apparently real, require only apparently sufficient causes; and such causes undoubtedly should be introduced in every stage production. The producer, of course, can do precisely as he likes in such matters. But, whenever he introduces an effect, let him at the same time introduce a valid cause. It is easy enough to do, and there is no excuse for neglecting to do it. The artificiality of stage work is always bound to cross the footlights in ample measure. The spectators are always sufficiently conscious of it, without having it rubbed in by unskilful workmanship. And whenever stagecraft is divorced from consistency, especially in the relations between cause and effect, the result is bound to represent the rubbing-in of a deleterious compound, already too liberally applied.

From these considerations a general rule, of extreme simplicity, may be deduced:

(7) Let nothing occur without an apparently substantial cause, and let every potential cause produce some apparently consequent effect.

If things occur without any apparent reason, stage work can never be made really convincing. If things are done which, although they seem likely to produce some marked result (and, by the audience, must be regarded as having that intention), do not lead to any result whatever, stage work can never be made really effective. In the former case, there is a paucity of the necessary material. In the latter, there is a

redundancy of useless detail. In neither case is there the consistency which art demands; but, in both cases, there is bound to be distraction, loss of effect, and lack of unity.

That such points as these are of material importance in the art of magic, cannot be denied by any magician who aspires to the rank of a true artist. It is just these little things which make all the difference between good work and bad. They are but little things, easily attended to; yet, after all is said and done, they are the things which distinguish art from claptrap. To include them in a presentation adds but little more to the performer's efforts. Still:

"And that little more, and how much it is...
And that little less, and what worlds away."
--*Browning*, "By the Fireside."

The requirements of consistency, broadly speaking, may be summarized as follows:

Everything done, used, and introduced should be:

- a. Consistent with the "atmosphere" of the presentation.
- b. Consistent with each situation, as revealed.
- c. Consistent with subsequent events.

Everything that occurs should be:

- a. Consistent with the procedure adopted.
- b. Consistent with causes understood by the spectators.
- c. Consistent with the final impression intended to be produced.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER V

JUSTIFICATION

FROM what has already been deduced in the course of our inquiry, we perceive that since, on occasion, specific rules may be disregarded, there arises a very pertinent question. How may we determine the extent to which, in various circumstances, a disregard of reasoned conclusions is permissible? Broadly speaking, of course, we may say that if we introduce details which are not in accordance with accepted rules, we must always be able to justify our action. In no case must we be content with mere excuses. To frame excuses is foreign to the procedure of an artist, because "qui s'excuse, s'accuse." His feeblest plea must never fall below the level of provable justification. Such obvious facts, however, provide but little guidance. Therefore, we must now endeavor to ascertain, with reasonable accuracy, the conditions wherein justification may be proved.

As stated in our [first rule](#), no departure from accepted principles should be made without some special reason. Among such reasons, there is one of preëminent importance; that is, the production of some particular effect which otherwise would be impossible. The impossibility, however, should be clearly manifest. If, by any means, the production of that effect can be brought about in conformity with established principles, no departure from those principles can be justified. In any such case, the only possible source of justification is absolute necessity.

If such fundamental considerations were the only matters involved, the question of justification would be one of extreme simplicity. But unfortunately the case is far otherwise. In the majority of instances, justification cannot be pleaded on the ground of absolute necessity. Given the aid of every possible facility, a magician could seldom justify the departure from the normal principles of his art. But, as a matter of fact, magicians usually perform under conditions of an extremely unfavorable nature. Therefore, we find the most common ground for justification is not absolute necessity but present expediency. Rules are broken, not because the effect produced demands their violation, but because circumstances render such violation *expedient*. Thus, justification becomes subject to the force of circumstances. At the same time, it must be remembered, valid justification can only exist when the force of circumstances is irresistible.

Suppose, for example, a magician performing at a theater where every facility is available, produces an act which is artistically perfect. Then, suppose that the magician is compelled to transfer his act to another theater, where such favorable conditions do not exist; in order to produce his act at the second theater, he may have to introduce some detail which, according to accepted principles, is inartistic. Or he may have to omit some important detail, and thereby render his presentation artistically incomplete. In either case, his procedure can undoubtedly be justified on the ground of expediency. He does as he does, not because of essential necessity, but because the force of circumstances is too great to be overcome. The obvious rule is:

(8) Always remember that avoidable defects are incapable of justification.

This rule applies equally to great matters and to small, to broad effects and minute details. Although in some particular respect departure from accepted rule may be justified, it does not follow that the principle violated is thereby rendered negligible for the time being. On the contrary, the circumstances demand that every care be taken to insure that the extent of departure shall be as limited as possible. Care should be taken to add every available perfection, in other respects, with a view to compensating for the unavoidably defective procedure adopted. A specific rule may be stated thus:

(9) Always remember that a plea of justification is ordinarily an acknowledgment of error, and consequently demands every possible reparation.

That is to say, when one is obliged to fall back upon the aid of justification, one should use every available means for correcting any deficiency that may be brought into evidence. The greater the divergence from proper and effective methods, the greater the necessity for compensating perfections. If we are compelled to introduce imperfections, they should be reduced to the utmost possible minimum, disguised in every possible manner, and compensated for by the inclusion of every possible perfection of subsidiary detail. By such means, the inevitable fault may be rendered practically imperceptible.

Herein we discover the reason why so many productions, inartistic in themselves, prove to be quite effective before an average audience. With knowledge derived from a process of trial and error, performers are enabled to disguise, to a great extent, the technical faults of their productions. Thus, in course of time, subsidiary perfections become so augmented as to render a very faulty presentation acceptable to the general public. That, however, provides no justification for avoidable faults. However good a faulty performance may appear to the uninitiated, it would appear still better were the faults removed. The majority of spectators may not know why the thing is better in its more perfect form. They may not understand the reasons which have dictated the alterations made. But the performer, at any rate, ought to know when his presentation is defective, and should understand how to remove avoidable defects.

There are always two ways of doing anything--a right and a wrong way. Any ignoramus can bungle about with a thing until eventually he makes it pass muster among those who know as little as himself. But even then the thing will not be right in the eyes of an expert. Anything done in the wrong way can never be right in itself. The only

advantage about it is that the wrong way does not have to be learned. It is available to all who prefer it; but unfortunately it does not lead to perfection. Not only so, it eventually leads to far more trouble than would be involved in learning the right way first of all.

Further than this, we must not lose sight of the fact that there is a question of principle involved. An artist prefers to work in the right way, if only to show that he knows how the work should be done. Even though some particular effect could be produced in the wrong way, that would be no excuse for using faulty methods.

The end cannot justify the means, if the proper means would serve as well as the defective means actually employed. For as Aristotle says

"If, indeed, this end might as well, or nearly as well, have been attained, without departing from the principles of the particular art in question, that fault, in that case, could not be justified; since faults of every kind should, if Possible, be avoided."--Poetics, Part IV, Chap. H.

To this, we may add that when, as is usually the case, the end may be attained more readily and more perfectly by adhering to the principles of our particular art, there is not even a plausible excuse for defective workmanship. Indeed, the only possible excuse is ignorance. Those who prefer, by implication, to raise that plea are of course quite welcome to that dubious privilege. An artist would rather suffer torture than do anything of the kind. "Good enough for the public" is ample justification for defects which are difficult to overcome; but, when the observance of recognized principles would be just as easy, and just as effective, "Good enough for the public" becomes the plea of either an ignoramus or a fool. In such an event, the performer may be perfectly sure that he appears in one or other of those characters. If he is content to do so, well and good! That is entirely his affair. Our present inquiry does not concern him. For all that, we can see there is no justification for the attitude he has adopted.

Although, as already mentioned, a magician's stage surroundings are of prime importance in this connection, they are far from being the only ground for justification. The diversities of taste and appreciation shown by various types of audiences may equally justify some occasional divergence from normal procedure. This has been previously suggested by our deductions concerning the subject of unity. We may now with advantage develop the point still further.

Taking a practical instance, we will suppose a magician intends to present (say) "The Rising Cards," and has at command two methods of performing that trick. One of those methods, let us say, is well known to magicians but very effective to the public. The other method does not appeal to the public so strongly, but entirely puzzles magicians. In reality, of course, he has two distinct tricks, similar in effect. That fact would be understood by his fellow-craftsmen; but, to the public, either trick would be simply "The Rising Cards."* Then the question is, which method should the performer employ?

**It must be remembered that, to the public-and unfortunately, to the press either the effect, or some prominent feature of a trick, is the trick itself. We commonly hear of*

"The Vanishing Lady," "The Box Trick," "The Cabinet Trick," "The Ghost Illusion," "The Slate Trick," and so on. Apparently, most people cannot imagine that more than one trick may be associated with a certain kind of effect or a particular form of appliance.

The answer must depend upon the kind of audience with which he has to deal. To an audience of conjurers he would naturally present the superior method. The other would only bore his spectators. But to the general public, apart from some special reason to the contrary, he should present the more familiar yet more effective method, less perfect though it may be. To the public, either method would be quite inexplicable; and, therefore, there would be every justification for choosing that which appeals to the public more highly. Indeed, one might almost say that, in the circumstances, the use of the superior method would hardly be justified, for the simple reason that it would fail to produce its due effect.

In the practice of an art, one must always keep in view the fact that, in the absence of an effective appeal to the imagination, art is, to all intents and purposes, non-existent. It is true that a poet, a painter or a sculptor may produce a work of art which contemporary opinion may condemn, and future ages may approve beyond measure. But suppose that, disheartened by present failure, the artist were to destroy the work he had produced, the result would be precisely as though that work had never been attempted. It came into a momentary existence, it made no appeal to the minds of those who saw it, and it disappeared completely.

The work, however meritorious it may have been, was but wasted effort. It did not serve the cause of art in the remotest degree. It was but ephemeral in its existence, and failed to evoke contemporary approval. In short, it was useless.

Precisely analogous is the case of a magician who presents work which his audiences cannot appreciate. Apart from its presentation, the art of magic has no sensible existence. It is naturally ephemeral, and demands instant appreciation.

Primarily, the true function of any art is not the promotion of its own advancement, but the promotion of enjoyment and the elevation of the intelligence of mankind. In performing such functions, its own advancement is automatically achieved. That being so, it must be useless to exhibit any ephemeral achievement in art which, to those who see it, is not effective. Such presentations have no artistic value. They can neither serve to raise the level of human intelligence, nor to promote human enjoyment.

We have previously referred to the necessity for maintaining as high a level of merit as possible. But at the same time, we have pointed out there is every reason for bearing in mind the natural limitations of certain audiences. By all means let people see good work-the best they are capable of appreciating-on every possible occasion. But work which is too good for them is, practically, as valueless as that which is not good enough. Within the capacity of a magician's audience, the higher he rises the greater will be the appreciation accorded to his work. Beyond that prescribed limit, however, the higher he rises the less will be the value of his achievement.

It has been said very justly that every virtue is, as it were, a middle course between two opposite vices. Thus, courage is midway between cowardice and rashness; thrift is midway between acquisitiveness and improvidence; morality is midway between prudery and licentiousness; and so forth. In like manner, justification stands half-way between the faults of pedantry, on the one hand, and the failures of ignorance, on the other.

The rule should be:

(10) Cut your coat according to your cloth, but spare no pains in the cutting, or your procedure cannot be justified.

The foregoing considerations enable us to discuss, upon a more definite basis, the question of dual effect, already mentioned in connection with the subject of unity. We can now readily understand that, in certain circumstances, two simultaneous developments may be presented in such a manner as to justify the departure from the principles of unity. We can see that justification may be proved on various grounds of expediency. For example, one of two magical feats may add a climax to the entire presentation, and thus aid the general impression produced in the minds of spectators. Or, on the other hand, the development of one effect may involve certain periods of time which, to the public, would appear vacant, were they not filled in with the processes connected with the second effect. In any case, however, the dual presentation must not involve serious division of interest, or the total result will be neither artistic nor effective. We shall have to return to this subject later on; and, therefore, we need not consider it further at present.

We may conclude our remarks upon justification by summarizing the rational conclusions to be deduced from the facts stated. There is no need for recapitulating all the minor points we have reviewed. It is only necessary to emphasize the main features of our inquiry, as follows:

In order to know what may or may not be justified, it is essential to acquire an understanding of the purposes of art, and the manner in which those purposes can best be fulfilled. Hence the importance of systematic inquiry and the need for accurate reasoning. Every instance wherein justification has to be claimed represents a special problem, requiring to be dealt with in accordance with the facts of the case. The true solution cannot be arrived at by the aid of mere opinion. The only reliable source of evidence is knowledge. That which serves the purposes of art in the best manner available, is justified. That which does not so serve the purposes of art, is incapable of justification.

We argue that, in everything he does, a magician should be able to demonstrate the grounds upon which he claims that the procedure is either artistically correct or absolutely justified. To an artist, "good enough" is never good enough. His work must be correct; or, failing that, as nearly correct as circumstances permit.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER VI

SURPRISE AND REPETITION

WE NOW proceed to deal with two diametrically opposite methods of producing effect, each method being the converse and complement of the other. Upon reflection it will become evident that, as a rule, the effect produced by a magical presentation depends upon the proper employment of one or other of the two principles now to be considered. In other words, a magical effect is generally associated with some form of surprise or is derived from some degree of repetition. Since the principles involved in those two methods of procedure are mutually antagonistic, they can seldom be used in combination. Although a certain element of surprise may enter into the cumulative effect produced by repetition, it is clearly impossible to repeat a startling surprise. These examples may best be illustrated by concrete examples, familiar to us all. We shall at once, then, cite examples which we think will serve to make our reasoning clear. It must be borne in mind, however, that this present discussion has to be taken in conjunction with that which follows next--*i.e.*, the subject of "Gradual Transition."

As our first example, we take a well-known effect which depends upon the creation of surprise. For this purpose, nothing could serve better than the illusion known as "The Vanishing Lady," invented by Buatier de Kolta, reproduced by various other magicians, and consistently mangled, for years, by duffers of every nationality. The "dry bones" of this feat, as Professor Hoffmann would say, are familiar to us all. So also is the effective nature of the presentation, when properly carried out.

If we give even a moment's thought to the question, we realize the impossibility of associating such a feat with anything in the nature of repetition. The effect produced is bound to be either a surprise or a disappointment. If the performance does not culminate in a surprise, it becomes an abject failure--"condemned to eternal redemption," as Dogberry says. No man who ever stood before an audience would be so mad as to repeat it, in the hope of doing better next time and thus saving his credit. The audience would simply laugh him off the stage in such a case.

Herein, we perceive the characteristic feature of such presentations. They depend upon the sudden creation of some mysterious change of condition or change of place. The effect must be instantaneous. There is no opportunity for cumulative methods of building up an effect, step by step.

Incidentally, the preceding paragraph suggests a general definition of the characteristic feature of any magical feat that which distinguishes magical effects from those produced by other arts. Probably no better definition than this can be found: *Something or somebody is caused to pass mysteriously from one place or condition to another.* That is what invariably happens when a magical feat is performed. We cannot do any single magical thing which that sentence does not broadly describe. In view of this definition, we are led to appreciate the essential limitations of the magic art. And, at the same time, we are impressed with the necessity for knowing the best means for utilizing the scanty material at our disposal. The difficulty of producing a new magical effect is about equivalent to that of inventing a new proposition in Euclid. That, however, is a matter for congratulation, rather than otherwise. The greater the difficulty, the greater the merit. It is a fact which should add much to the dignity of our art. In our present inquiry, the most important point to be remembered is this: Realizing the extreme difficulty of raising any worthy superstructure upon foundations so narrow, we have every reason to be careful in our architecture.

Turning to the second principle under discussion we may quote, for example, the well-known feat of catching coins in the air. In a performance such as this, it is evident that the element of actual surprise is practically absent. The mere fact of apparently catching a coin, once only, would produce no effect at all. In itself, the feat is so small, as compared with magicians' other works, that it would leave even the most unsophisticated spectator quite unimpressed. But by repeating the process again and again, spectators become gradually imbued with a sense of mystification. There is no surprise—there can be none; because every time the performer raises his hand, the catching of a coin is foreseen. Yet, as time goes on, the spectators are compelled to form the mental query, "Where in the world does he get all those coins?" The more of them he produces, the greater is the effect upon his audience within due limits, of course. No true artist would ever be guilty of continuing his repetitions to the point of wearisomeness.

In this typical instance, we recognize the characteristic operation of the principle of repetition, and the method of utilizing that principle for the production of a cumulative effect. We can see that, in performing a small manipulation as an isolated occurrence, the principle of surprise cannot possibly be brought into operation. But, by continued repetition of that insignificant feat, one is enabled to build up an impression of magical achievement, the magnitude of which is out of all proportion to the cause which produced it.

Thus, we may safely lay down a rule to the following effect:

(11) Always remember that a notable surprise is incapable of repetition; and that the repetition of an effect, of any kind whatever, cannot create surprise.

As a further example of the cumulative effect to be gained by repetition, we may here point out the well-known efficiency of a catchword, as a means of attaining effect. There is no walk of life in which the catchword is not a factor of at least occasional importance. Even in matters which affect the public welfare it is often exploited in a

manner so puerile and so vulgar that, to anyone who understands the game, the process becomes absolutely disgusting. Still, as a means of legitimate entertainment, and in the honest fulfillment of artistic purposes, the catchword has merits which should not be neglected. Take, for instance, Dr. Lynn's "That's how it's done!" or Buatier de Kolta's "Isn't it wonderful?" Those phrases have become classic. They have done yeoman service, not only to their respective authors, but also to many lesser men who have adopted the phrases—generally without either permission or acknowledgment. The first time such a phrase is used, it has little effect, if any. The second time, it receives just a mild appreciation. The third time, the audience may smile. The fourth time, the words cause a laugh. The fifth and all subsequent repetitions create a roar.

There we have in a nutshell all requisite proof as to the value of cumulative effect. At the same time we are enabled to understand the broad distinction to be drawn between the respective applications of surprise and repetition. We are also enabled to understand the cogency of a general rule, which may be stated thus:

(12) A minor conception ordinarily demands the cumulative effect of repetition; a conception important in itself should usually create a distinct surprise.

Here we may revert to the question of dual presentation, previously discussed. Although the antagonistic elements of surprise and repetition can scarcely be combined to produce a single effect, we may readily combine them in a presentation which comprises a dual effect. And beyond doubt that may be done, not only without confusion, but also with a marked amplification of the impression created.

From these considerations, the following rule may be deduced:

(13) The simultaneous presentation of two independent feats is permissible when one of them is associated with cumulative effect and the other results in a final surprise.

When we think about the matter, it certainly seems rather strange that, although one may have heard a full description of some magical or dramatic surprise, such foreknowledge does not detract appreciably from the impression one receives on witnessing the performance. Even though one may have witnessed a play or a magical production many times, one does not altogether lose the impression intended. Commentators have frequently noted this, in relation to dramatic performances; and, no doubt, the true explanation is that originally given by Marmontel in 1787. He says, in his quaint, old-world French--"*La marche de l'action en ecarte la reminiscence: l'impression de ce que l'on voit empêche de réfléchir a ce que l'on fait.*" We are too much absorbed in the action to think of previous information. What we see prevents us from reflecting upon what we know.

A guiding principle adopted by Buatier de Kolta may here be mentioned, with advantage. On many occasions, de Kolta and one of the present writers had animated discussions upon this and similar points. One of his most definite and unalterable opinions was that, if an audience had any idea of what was about to happen, there could be no surprise and consequently no effect could be made upon the minds of spectators. "An illusionist," he would often remark, "should never tell the public what

he is going to do. If people know what is coming, they will not be surprised. If they are not surprised, there is no effect. The illusion is worth nothing--it *is* nothing."

In one sense, de Kolta was probably right; but, regarded as a general principle, his view of the question is open to serious doubt. His argument was based upon premises far too narrow. Given ideal conditions, of course, the position he took would be unassailable; but, in everyday life, an abstract proposition of that kind has very little relation to the exigencies of practice. With all due deference to the opinion of a magician so eminent as Buatier de Kolta, we contend that in practice one's procedure must be governed to a great extent by expediency. We have already shown that hard and fast rules cannot be prescribed in any branch of art. Contingent circumstances must always be taken into account. Theory, reduced to practice, is a useful guide but nothing more. Divorced from practice, theory becomes a mere will-o'-the-wisp, the pursuit of which is but waste of time for the average man.

The essential fallacy of the principle just now discussed may be readily shown by de Kolta's own procedure. When, for instance, an illusion is described as "The Vanishing Lady," or "*L'Escamotage d'une Personne Vivante*," how can one hope to conceal the fact that the lady will vanish, or that the living person will be subject to jugglery? The title itself prevents any such possibility. Yet, at the same time, the title provides more than half the attraction exercised upon the public. It would be absurd not to make the revelation, which unavoidably has to be made before complete success can be achieved.

There is, however, one direction in which, as we previously indicated, this principle may be usefully applied. Marmontel gives us the key to this, in the quotation we have made from his writings. The action in progress before the spectators is that which mainly determines the impression produced. Previous knowledge or information can have but little influence on the final result. A really artistic presentation will so largely absorb one's attention that the existence or absence of foreknowledge becomes, comparatively speaking, a negligible factor. Thus, there is obviously much reason for avoiding, so far as circumstances permit, the immediate revelation of what is coming. In fact, from the various points recently considered, we may evolve a rule of some occasional importance:

(14) Unless good reason can be shown, never explain, UPON THE STAGE, precisely what you are about to accomplish.

In effect, this rule represents the true application of de Kolta's advice. "Unless good reason can be shown"--therein lies the whole crux of the matter. But very often good reason *can* be shown. At times, indeed, it would be the height of folly for a performer not to explain most fully the precise details of the effect he is about to produce. A case of this kind, for instance, would arise when the effect is small in actual dimensions but very startling if completely understood. Every one of us can call to mind effects which, unless explicitly described beforehand, would never be thoroughly appreciated. An illustration of this fact is the decanter and handkerchief trick, wherein handkerchief suddenly disappears from one glass vessel and reappears in another. The common

experience of every magician will prove that such a presentation loses nothing by describing the effect beforehand. On the contrary, the small dimensions of the articles employed may be said to necessitate a complete disclosure of the coming events, in order to secure their immediate appreciation.

Again, in the case of a highly important and sensational illusion, demanding close attention on the part of the audience, one may often be well advised in making a theoretically premature revelation of one's intentions. When everybody in the civilized world has heard all about the thing, there may not be much disadvantage in taking the present spectators into one's confidence. They know what is coming, and the effect may perhaps be greatly enhanced if they are told exactly what to expect. In certain cases of this kind, it is true, the performer might produce unqualified surprise in the first few audiences to whom he presents the effect. But, after that, such surprise becomes impossible. The newspapers have given full descriptions of the performance-the wires and cables have spread the information broadcast throughout the world. Consequently, the moment he begins his introduction "even the cats" know what is coming. Among the whole crowd of spectators, the only point of interest is to "see it done."

Conclusive proof of the occasional necessity for complete disclosure of what is about to take place, is provided by such presentations as that of the world-renowned "Box Trick." The very essence of the effect consists in the fact that spectators are fully informed of what is intended to be done and are allowed to try to discover the means whereby the feat will be accomplished. Without such foreknowledge and opportunity for previous investigation, the effect would be lost. They are told that a performer will escape from the box, in spite of the bonds with which it will be secured. They are told that the feat is performed by means of a trick in the construction of the box. They are invited to discover that trick, if they can. Having failed to make such discovery, their amazement when the feat is subsequently accomplished is unbounded. In no other way could the full effect of the invention be attained. Complete premonition is the only possible means for securing due appreciation of any such performance. Reticence, in a case of this kind, would be simply fatal to the ultimate effect, and therefore inartistic to the last degree. Hence in such a case the performer's best course surely must be to emphasize the salient feature of his presentation, and to impress upon his audiences the extraordinary nature of the things he intends to show them.

In this, of course, as in all other matters, one's procedure must be governed by circumstances. But we may safely say that, nine times out of ten, when a performer presents an illusion of world-wide renown, he can lose but little and may gain much by openly confessing his intentions. At such a time, his attitude toward the public, for all practical purposes, may safely be, "I am going to show you something which has startled the world, and would startle you immensely if you did not know what is coming. When you have seen it done, you will be able to imagine how much you would have been surprised if you had not already heard about it." In response to that suggestion, the audience is almost certain to adopt an acquiescent attitude of mind; and accordingly the final effect will resemble that produced by absolute surprise.

It is owing to similar causes that dramatic situations such as that relating to "Hawkshaw" remain thoroughly impressive, even to those most familiar with them. Familiarity does not breed contempt, because the action in progress diverts the spectator's attention from what he knows, and renders him interested only in "seeing it done." He is compelled to enter into the spirit of the performance, and to allow full play to his imagination.

The last sentence forcibly recalls an opinion which the present writers have long entertained, and which can do no harm if stated. At the worst, it can but cause a momentary digression. It relates to the definition of art in the abstract. In the early portion of our inquiry, we touched upon the great difficulty of answering, and the numerous attempts made to answer, the question "What is Art?" To make another attempt may be to display unjustifiable temerity, but here it is: *Art is work which stimulates imagination.* Be that as it may, however, there can be no doubt that it is the exercise of imagination which prevents an artistic effect from being destroyed by foreknowledge--a fact well worth remembering.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER VII

EFFECTS OF TRANSITION

IN ADDITION to the two chief classes of effect, respectively associated with surprise and repetition, there is a third to which reference has been previously made—the class which depends upon the gradual and visible development of some mysterious change. A typical example is the so-called "Pepper's Ghost" effect, invented by Silvester some forty years ago. Another familiar type is that of "The Growth of Flowers." But there can be no possibility of mistaking the classification of such effects as should be placed in this category. They are characterized by the distinctive feature of comparatively slow progression, in contrast to the sudden effects associated with the methods of surprise.

Although less often employed than the two chief classes of magical effect, the effects of transition are by no means of less importance from an artistic point of view. Indeed, owing to the mere fact of their comparative rarity, they appeal strongly to an artist's appreciation. They should be less liable to become hackneyed, and the difficulty of inventing novelties in connection with them should enhance their value as a class.

Unfortunately, however, such is far from being the case in actual practice. It ought to be so, but it is not. In this, as in so many other instances, "ought stands for nought." The very rarity of original productions of this kind tends to defeat its own ends. There are so few of them, and so many want to present them, that a new effect of transition is liable to become worked to death in a very short time. Further, it must be remembered that a rare effect usually creates a far greater degree of public excitement than one of more stereotyped form. It is more talked about, more people come to see it, and thus it more quickly becomes stale. Nevertheless, in this class of effect there still exist great possibilities, both artistically and financially. There is still a wide field of useful work in this direction, which may be found well worthy of cultivation.

In illusions based upon effects of transition, the question of artistic treatment is of especial importance. Indeed, now and then, the problem of presenting them in the best possible way to insure due appreciation is one of extreme difficulty. The instant appeal to a spectator's perception which naturally attends a surprise is entirely lacking. The cumulative effect built up, step by step, in the case of a repetition is equally unavailable. It follows, therefore, that the adequate presentation of an effect of transition usually involves, in some respect or other, procedure which differs more or less from that which

would be advisable in other conditions. We shall endeavor to ascertain, with the aid of common sense and practical experience, the nature of the principles which should govern our procedure when dealing with effects of this special class.

Here we may at once set down a rule which common sense and experience must inevitably endorse to the fullest possible degree. Yet, at the same time, unless the dictates of those able guides are clearly understood and remembered, the principle underlying that rule may easily become lost to sight. Hence the necessity for a definite statement, as follows:--

(15) When presenting an effect of pure transition, the first and most important essential is the avoidance of every possible cause of distraction.

Let there be no mistake about this. Although the rule is merely a specific application of the principle embodied in Rule 4, the extreme importance of that principle in the present instance justifies the utmost insistence upon the necessity for keeping it in view. Stated plainly and simply, the fact to be remembered is that, while an effect of transition is in progress, nothing else of importance should be allowed to occur--that is to say, nothing which tends to produce a definite impression upon the minds of the spectators. There should be no sudden change in any of the conditions attending the development of the effect. Only such movements and sounds as accompany the commencement of the transition should be permitted to occur; and, conversely, such sounds and movements should continue until the effect has been completed.

For example, an accompaniment of soft and flowing melody is a most useful adjunct to effects of transition. Rhythmic and continuous movements on the part of the performer--as, for example, mesmeric passes or silent incantations--are also advantageous, as a rule. But if such adjuncts are to be employed, they should accompany the transition from start to finish. The only case in which a departure from the letter of this law is advisable, is when the effect occupies but little time and culminates in a definite surprise. Say, for instance, on the stage there were a table with the cloth laid for a meal. The center of the cloth rises, and gradually the figure of a man develops beneath it. The figure throws off the cloth and stands revealed, let us say, as Mephistopheles. In such a case, the final throwing off of the cloth brings a sudden revelation--a surprise. Consequently, during the development of the figure, movements and exclamations, directing attention to what is happening may advantageously accompany the progress of affairs, and may render the climax all the more effective. Therefore, we may say:

(16) When an effect of transition ends with a sudden revelation or surprise, the course of transition should usually be punctuated by actions or sounds leading up to and accentuating the final impression.

Reverting to [Rule 13](#) (which relates to effects, purely, of transition), there is one consideration which should not be overlooked. It is a point which indicates the essentially different conditions respectively associated with transitions pure and simple, and transitions culminating in an effect of surprise. In effects of simple transition, such as the gradual fading away of a spirit form, there is an absence of any marked change such as is generally associated with magical presentations. therefore, without some prompting of

their intelligence, the spectators may fail to observe the commencement of the process, or may be unable to realize precisely when it has ended. One can never count upon the exercise of either intelligence or perspicacity on the part of an audience. So, unless steps are taken to indicate definitely what is the nature of the intended effect, and to point out precisely where it begins and where it ends, a transition, however marvelous, may fall flat. The spectators may realize the truth of the matter after they have gone home, but that is not good enough for artistic purposes. They must, if possible, be made to understand what they see, the moment they see it. For these reasons, we may advisably prescribe the rule that:

(17) In every effect of pure transition, the beginning and end of the process involved should be distinctly indicated by some coincident occurrence.

That is to say, when such an effect is about to be introduced, its presentation should be subject to most careful preparation. It should be prefaced by stage business which will impress upon spectators the fact that something of a very unusual character is about to happen. Their minds should receive the impression that a weird and mysterious effect, demanding close attention, is on the point of being shown. And at the moment when transition commences, there should occur a definite halt in the subsidiary action--a distinct point of demarcation, showing that the interesting period has begun. In like manner, at the end of the transition, there should be a similar (or, rather, a converse) break in the proceedings, showing that what the audience was specially required to observe has been done. Ordinarily, the most suitable stage business for these two respective occasions is, in effect, such as will suggest the following idea. When the transition begins, the idea suggested should be, "Look! something mysterious is going to happen over there. What will it be?" When the effect has been shown, the suggestion should be, "Now you know what was coming, because you have seen it done and have watched the process from beginning to end."

As an apt illustration, we may mention the appearing to Hamlet of his father's ghost. The previous dialog has fully prepared the spectators for what they are about to see. Indeed, Hamlet has gone to the battlements for the express purpose of meeting with the spirit form of his father. All are expecting the ghost to appear. What happens, so far as our present inquiry is concerned, is given by Shakespeare in two exclamations and a stage-direction, thus:

"Horatio--Look, my lord, it comes!

(Enter Ghost.)

"Hamlet--Angels and ministers of grace, defend us!"

Now, translating "Enter Ghost" as meaning the gradual materialization of a spirit form, we cannot help seeing how well the two exclamations serve their respective purposes. Horatio directly calls attention to the misty outline in course of formation; and, when the development has matured, Hamlet's words leave no doubt that the figure now standing before him represents the fulfilment of his expectation, and also that of every onlooker. There is no possibility of mistaking the situation. The effect is complete. Nobody can possibly anticipate any further development, for the moment.

Reduced to their most practical form, the facts of this present discussion may be stated

thus: When effects of transition are presented, the audience must be shown when to look, where to look, and when to applaud. If left to discover those things for themselves, spectators may almost certainly be expected to fail in the discovery. Nine times out of ten, spectators cannot be relied upon to see things which stare them in the face, or to understand things which are as simple as A B C. This is a fact to which some exponents of magic owe a lifelong debt of gratitude; since, but for that fact, they could never hold up their heads in public. And to speak the entire truth, it is a fact in which even the most skilled magicians find comfort when things go wrong.

But we cannot have it both ways. We cannot expect the public to keep a bright lookout for things we want them to see, and, at the same time, preserve their normal blindness to the things we want to conceal. The art of magic essentially depends for its success upon the skilful maneuvering which enables a performer to subdue the critical and observant faculties of his audiences. The subjugation of those faculties is the first necessity imposed upon him by his art. After that comes the process of suggestion, whereby his audiences are led to adopt the particular attitude of mind he wishes them to assume at any moment. It naturally follows that, when we have lulled a spectator's reasoning powers into a state of comparative rest, it is absurd to expect that he will at once grasp any idea which, in the ordinary course, would occur to him. We must always remember that, having induced a marked condition of mental receptivity, we cannot expect our subjects to conceive ideas other than those we convey, either directly or by suggestion. It is impossible that, at one and the same time, spectators can think as we want them to and also think as they ordinarily would. This being the case, it is easy to see how necessary it is to make everything clear to one's audience; even though, in order to do this, one may sometimes be compelled to state exactly what is about to take place.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER VIII

CLIMAX

THIS BRANCH of our inquiry brings us to a point where we meet with a distinct difference between the respective requirements of Magic and Drama. We find that, in this instance, the two sets of conditions are entirely dissimilar. Therefore, except by way of antithesis, the considerations which govern one case form no guide to rational procedure in the other. But, at the same time, this very divergence provides a source of useful information. We gain a better understanding of our own art, if we ascertain the differences which distinguish its requirements from those of an art more or less allied to it. Thus, we may with advantage make a brief digression from our direct course, in order to study "climax" from a dramatic standpoint. By so doing, we shall obtain a truer conception of the principles relating to our own particular case.

Broadly speaking, the primary basis of drama consists in the fulfilment of two vitally essential requirements, each exactly complementary to the other. The play which fails to achieve such fulfilment must fail entirely. In the first place, a dramatist has to create and sustain interest. In the second place, that interest must be fully satisfied. If he cannot interest his audience, his play is obviously hopeless. If, having interested his audience, he cannot satisfy the interest he has aroused, his play is worthless. There can be no object in putting on the stage anything that leads to nothing. The play which merely creates an interest to thwart it cannot have any pretension to artistic merit. The pretended art which provides no mental satisfaction is but a travesty of art.

Hence, since the drama undoubtedly requires both the creation and satisfaction of interest, we clearly see that the subject of "climax" has a most important relation to the adequate treatment of dramatic themes. It is impossible, simultaneously, to create and satisfy dramatic interest. The two processes must be distinct, and must be carried out in proper order. And between the two there lies the crowning point of expectancy-the climax of the play. The creation and development of dramatic interest represent a crescendo of effect, the highest point of which constitutes the climax. Then follows the satisfaction of dramatic interest, the unraveling of that tangled thread of events.

Thus, the climax of a play consists in a dramatic situation, the genesis of which has been revealed by previous events, and the supreme interest in which depends upon the suspense and expectation induced in the minds of the spectators. It is a situation in

which no sense of finality can possibly exist. In order to bring about finality the situation must be resolved and rounded off, in a manner which will relieve the suspense and satisfy the expectations of the audience.

Now in a magical presentation the case is far different. It is true that the magician, equally with the dramatist, must both excite and satisfy the interest of his audience. But, whereas the dramatist deals with conceptions and processes of a nature familiar to all men, the magician's doings are entirely remote from normal experience, and certain differences in procedure are obviously requisite in the respective cases. The most notable difference is that, in dramatic work, the satisfaction of the interest created follows after the climax has been reached; while, in magic, the climax of events and the satisfaction of interest occur simultaneously. The dramatist's audience is interested in witnessing events which occur in accordance with normal experience, and which must be made to result in a more or less normal completion of the theme to which they relate. The magician's audience, on the contrary, is interested in witnessing events which have no relation to common experience, and can have no such emotional qualities as those associated with normal occurrences. In this case, the interest aroused is not that of witnessing the vicissitudes of human existence, but of witnessing operations performed, at will, by a being who possesses a power far beyond one's own. Therefore, the magician's audience is not called upon to sympathize with human emotions, but to take an interest in things which are entirely out of the common, and in events which are only interesting from the fact that they occur. So, in magic, the actual climax must necessarily represent finality. The climax comes when the magical event occurs; and, at the same time, the occurrence of that event entirely satisfies the expectation aroused.

From what has been said, it will be readily understood that the climax of a magical presentation demands even more careful consideration than the climax of a drama; because in magic the climax is also the completion. If the climax is not efficiently contrived, the completion must be inadequate. The final result must be imperfect. Thus a magician's stage business must be so organized that the procedure which leads to the final effect of a presentation will fully develop a constantly increasing interest; while, at the same time, due attention must be paid to the fact that the climax of interest and the satisfaction of interest have to be brought about simultaneously. That is to say, the magician, in leading up to his final effect, must bear in mind two points of fundamental importance. Firstly, he has to arrange the details of his procedure in such a manner that, as the climax approaches, the audience shall be compelled to anticipate remarkable results; and secondly, he must take especial care to guard against the production of an anticlimax.

The first of those two points is obviously important, and the mode of presentation whereby its observance may be insured is easily understood. The second point, however, concerning the avoidance of anticlimax, may not be grasped so readily. In order to understand it fully, one must first of all know what constitutes an anticlimax, and the reason why it is so detrimental to success. That knowledge having been gained, one may prescribe preventive measures of an efficient character.

What, then, *is* an anticlimax? It is a thing people often talk about as though its nature were commonly understood. In a sense, most people have an idea of the true meaning of the term, though it is very doubtful whether one person in a thousand could give a rational definition of it, or explain the detrimental quality it represents. Yet, unless this is done, it is impossible to talk sensibly on the subject; and, therefore, we must endeavor to arrive at the proper definition and provide the necessary explanation.

In itself, the term "anticlimax" suggests a general definition of its meaning which, although more or less correct, is far too vague to be of any practical value. It is obviously something which opposes the creation of an effective climax; and, as usually understood, it is something which occurs after the real climax has been produced. Beyond this, neither the term itself, nor the ideas usually associated with it, can be said to convey any definite information. Something more is wanted to enable one to speak with authority upon the subject.

We may take it that an anticlimax is an event which occurs after the true climax has been reached, and, thus occurring, detracts from the effect of a presentation. Now, there are only two possible sources from which such distractions can be derived. Either the climax is not complete in itself, or some new subject of interest is introduced afterward.

On thinking this out, we arrive at the real nature of an anticlimax. It is an occurrence derived from either unsatisfied or redundant interest. The climax has not been efficiently engineered, or is marred by faults in the subsequent procedure. In short, the effect does not end where it ought to end; the interest does not culminate at one single and definite point, but is subdivided and, consequently, reduced in its final value. A complete and perfect effect must necessarily have far greater value than an effect which is marred by incompleteness, or by subsequent distraction of interest. It follows that, in order to avoid anticlimax, we must leave nothing to be explained after the climax has occurred, and must introduce no subsequent matter of interest relating thereto. The rule should be:--

(18) In each presentation, the procedure should lead up to a culminating point of interest, at which point the magical effect should be produced, and after which nothing magically interesting should occur.

Otherwise, there is bound to be an anticlimax, more or less pronounced, and therefore more or less detrimental to the general impression produced.

Arising out of the conditions imposed by the preceding rule, there is another which is of equal importance in connection with certain forms of magical presentation. We refer to those presentations which include more than one effect. We can all recall to mind a number of instances in which several mutually-related magical changes are revealed in succession. The well-known "Cannon-ball and Rabbit Trick" is a case in point. Two hats are passed to the audience for inspection. Meanwhile, the performer produces a rabbit from among the folds of a feather boa borrowed from a lady spectator. The hats and the rabbit are taken upon the stage and, from one of the hats, a large and heavy metal ball is produced. One of the hats is then hung upon a candle,

which has hitherto been burning upon a side table. Into the second hat the cannon-ball is placed; and lastly, the rabbit is wrapped in a sheet of newspaper. Then follows the mysterious transposition of the various accessories. The newspaper parcel is crumpled up into a ball, and allowed to fall lightly upon the stage. The rabbit has obviously disappeared. The hat containing the cannon-ball is taken up and, in an instant, the heavy metal sphere vanishes, the rabbit reappearing in its place. The lighted candle which previously supported the other hat, is taken from the folds of a handkerchief; and finally, the hat is lifted from the candlestick revealing the cannon-ball which has taken the place of the candle. Thus, instead of a definite climax comprising one single effect, we have, as it were, a protracted climax including a number of separate but interdependent magical occurrences.

In such a case as this, it may seem that the rule we have stated in reference to climax cannot hold good. But, as a matter of fact, the principle remains entirely valid. The climax is not really distributed over a number of effects; it merely remains in suspense until the final effect is produced. That is clearly so because, until the last development has been reached, the interest increases, step by step. The real climax does not occur until the moment the final revelation is made-or, at any rate, it should not occur until then. Any revelation made after the true climax has passed must necessarily constitute an anticlimax. Therefore, we may say:

(19) When a presentation includes a number of effects in series, the final, effect should represent the true climax, and its predecessors successive steps whereby that climax is reached.

From the differences in treatment required in the respective cases of drama and magic, it will be seen that when, as often happens, those two arts have to be combined, special precautions should be observed. Since procedure which may be admirably adapted to the requirements of one art may be fatal to the other, nothing is easier than to play hob with both arts when in combination. Thus, if magical effects have to be introduced into a dramatic production, or dramatic effects are associated with a magical performance, a clear understanding of the methods which should be adopted is most essential. Without such knowledge, a presentation which, if properly managed, might be a great success, may easily become a disastrous failure. In the case of a combination of magic and drama, the truth of the saying that there is no royal road to success finds a very special application. The only road to be followed with safety is the path of knowledge. We shall therefore give a brief consideration to the procedure advisable when magical and dramatic effects are associated.

As a point of departure, we may refer to a fact, not generally recognized, but amply demonstrated by experience. It is a fact that is useful in showing something of the normal conditions to be met when drama and magic are simultaneously employed. The fact to which we allude is this: Many magical effects which (if presented as separate items in a program) evoke thunders of applause, are received with absolute silence when introduced as episodes in a dramatic plot. This, at first sight, may seem strange, but the apparent singularity disappears when one comes to a proper understanding of the circumstances. There is necessarily a reason for the result observed, and one that is

well worth ascertaining.

Looking at the matter broadly, it becomes evident that when magic and drama are associated, the diverse requirements of the two arts must call for a certain amount of mutual adjustment. Something of each must be modified for the benefit of the general effect. In [Rule 5](#), we stated the fundamental principle of unity, which demands that every presentation shall represent a distinct and complete entity, comprising one definite effect. Thus we see that when a magical item (instead of standing alone and complete within itself) is adapted to form an episode in a play, it no longer conveys an impression of finality, however complete may be the dramatic situation attending it. That is to say, it ought not to convey such an impression, in the circumstances described. Of course, it is quite possible to pitchfork a magical effect into a dramatic performance, without reference to the requirements of the plot and without serving any essential purpose, and then make that interpolated piece of magic go with the audience, just as it would go apart from the play. That kind of thing, however, does not represent the combination of magic with drama. Neither art aids the other in the slightest degree; while the magic is being presented, the drama has to halt. When the drama proceeds again, the magic must be cleared out of the way. Procedure such as this contravenes every essential rule of artistic unity. It degrades magic to the level of mere padding, as music and poetry have been degraded so frequently in modern plays of the vaudeville order. The simple truth is that the artistic combination of various arts can only be achieved by subjugating those arts, one and all, to the general requirements of artistic unity. They must not each be called upon to provide isolated "turns," one down and t'other come on. Their contributions must be so dovetailed together that each item forms a necessary step in the progress toward one common end.

A magical item presented in the course of a play should, therefore, form an essential part of that play. It should be an episode without which the plot would be incomplete. Preferably, it should be so entirely essential that the play could not be presented without it. At the very least, it should add something of consequence to the general progress and to the final effect. In any event, it should not be a thing which may be replaced by something else, or left out altogether without materially affecting the action of the play. Aristotle tells us, as already quoted, that everything which may be put in or left out at will is not properly a part of the presentation; and that statement has never been gainsaid by any subsequent authority upon the subject of art. Therefore, we must always endeavor to arrange our procedure in accordance with either one or the other of two distinct methods. We must either produce a number of isolated and independent effects in succession, each being complete and self-contained, or we must make the individual items a series of stepping-stones toward one final end.

That, of course, is not to say that a series of magical effects may not be loosely strung together in the form of a sequence of events, or in a slight sketch, wherein the performers personate imaginary characters. Presentations of that kind have no relation to the case in point. The successive effects have no connection with any definite theme of dramatic interest. Each is complete and perfect in itself, and is only related to the

others by a kind of natural order. There is no dramatic plot to be served by what takes place; and, for that reason, there is no question of combined effect to be considered.

When, however, we have to deal not only with magical feats, but also with dramatic construction, the "steppingstone" method has to be adopted. And in such circumstances, the more we reflect upon the subject the more clearly we see that "the play's the thing." The magical items are, as it were, beads held together and supported by the thread of dramatic interest. Thus connected, the beads form a chain of harmonious proportions. If we remove one of the beads, the general effect is marred. If we try to add an unnecessary bead, we must break the connecting thread in order to do so; and, by so doing, we cause the whole to fall asunder. The thread will no longer join up, and continuity cannot exist. The only thing to be done is to remove the superfluous addition, repair the broken thread and re-string the proper number of beads in their proper order. Thus, we arrive at the following rule:

(20) When Magic and Drama are combined in one presentation, the stage procedure should primarily be governed by the dramatic requirements of the case, rather than, by the normal principles of Art in Magic.

By no other means can such presentations be made to accord with the essential principle of unity. It is obvious that no possible sequence of magical happenings can, *per se*, form the thread of human interest requisite in a dramatic plot. At the same time, of course, such a sequence of effects may readily provide the means whereby a dramatic plot is carried out. But that is a very different thing from providing the plot itself. On the other hand, a dramatic plot may undoubtedly form the thread upon which magical occurrences depend, and by means of which they are so connected as to form one consistent and harmonious whole. The conditions upon which the very existence of dramatic- effect depends, require a connecting-thread of that kind. Without it, there can be no central support upon which the ultimate issue can turn. Since the principles of magical procedure are inadequate to provide the conditions requisite for dramatic effect, we are bound to fall back on the principles of drama for the main outlines of our presentation. Stated briefly, this means that when, in a combination of magic and drama, the respective requirements of those two arts are in opposition, magic must take second place.

No doubt, this may seem to impose rather a difficult task upon magicians. But to those who are worthy of being described as artists, that apparent difficulty soon disappears. Whatever we may do as artists, the first essential is to insure artistic unity. That being so, we can feel no pang in doing whatever may be necessary for the purposes of unity. We are prepared to sacrifice any personal foible or favorite method, in order that unity may be obtained. If we cannot sacrifice some amount of magical effect in order to gain the benefit to be derived from dramatic construction, we should drop the dramatic part altogether. We can only benefit by the aid of drama if we are prepared to fulfil the requirements of drama. If we seek to enlist the drama into our service and, at the same time, to retain the normal effect associated with each isolated magical production, we are bound to fail in our endeavors.

There can be no real difficulty in grasping the truth of this matter. A magical presentation is normally a thing complete and perfect in itself. It has its own involution, its own climax, and its own evolution. If we present magical effects in combination with a dramatic theme, we superimpose upon them a master-plot having a master-climax, and a master-evolution to be fulfilled, in order to produce unity in the final result. That being so, our magical items can no longer remain complete in themselves, without producing disruption of the dramatic theme and destroying its unity. The climax normally associated with each magical effect must be so modified as to form a stepping-stone to what comes after, instead of conveying an impression of finality as it ordinarily would. By no other means can artistic unity be preserved; because any other procedure would mean sacrificing that indispensable quality to the caprice of the producer of the performance. Better, by far, to leave drama entirely alone, than try to combine it with magic, and, at the same time, disregard dramatic principles.

The variation of procedure necessitated by the combination of drama with magic relates, of course, only to the general scheme of presentation-the unity of general effect. We must not run away with the idea that, because magic must sacrifice something for the sake of unity, everything must be sacrificed to the normal procedure of drama. On the contrary, in matters of detail magic has the right to demand the chief consideration. The broad lines on which the general effect is planned should certainly be guided by dramatic considerations, even to the detriment of magical interest. But, beyond that, magic steps into the position of command.

This follows as a natural consequence of the possible conflict between dramatic and magical requirements. The respective functions of drama and magic, when the two arts are combined, are perfectly evident. Drama provides the -theme of general interest. Magic provides the particular episodes whereby the dramatic theme is carried out with adequate effect. So long as each art is confined to the fulfilment of its proper end and aim, there can be no logical conflict between them. Therefore, as a corollary to Rule 20 we may say:

(21) When, in a combination of the two arts, the primary requirements of Drama have been satisfied, all subsidiary details of procedure should be dictated by the normal principles of Art in Magic.

Satisfactory provision for the exigencies of drama having been made, all other matters must be governed by magical considerations. It is when there exists either ignorance or neglect of the truths embodied in the last two rules, that we find antagonism between magic and drama in combination. We can quite easily understand how such antagonism arises, by recalling what so often occurs in practice. If a theatrical manager presents a combination of the two arts, he proceeds as though the magical details were of no importance whatever. He works entirely upon his usual lines of procedure. He acts as though he were producing an ordinary drama. The requirements of magic never enter his head. It is only after completing the production, from a dramatic standpoint--stage-business, scenery, furniture, fittings and dresses included--he begins to think about the magical effects which have to be introduced. The natural result is an

entire failure in ultimate effect. The performance induces no sense of conviction in the minds of those who witness it. The magical occurrences essential to the theme are ruined, and in their ruin the whole production is wrecked.

Conversely, a magician has to guard against a natural tendency in the opposite direction. Some allowance, no doubt, may be made by others on that account, but he should make none on his own part. He should not allow his ideas to be dominated by the desire to make the utmost of his magical business, without regard to the dramatic theme with which it is associated. Otherwise' he will fail in the final result, just as surely as the dramatist who throws the whole of his energy into a drama, regardless of the magical episodes upon which his ultimate success largely depends.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER IX

PRESENTATION

IN RELATION to what may be termed the "applied art" side of magic, the subject of presentation has not only the widest scope, but also the most vital importance of all subdivisions of the Art in Magic. Indeed, since magic is one of the ephemeral arts, which can only attain fruition in actual performance, one might say that without adequate presentation there can be no art in magic. And, apart from mechanical and speculative matters, that statement would be entirely accurate. The final purpose of the art is the presentation of its effects; and, until those effects are presented, the art itself cannot be perfected, but must remain a thing of little importance in the eyes of the world. Therefore, it is in this department of his art that the magician, as it were, puts the coping-stone upon the edifice erected by his skill and labor.

In accordance with the manner in which that final work is carried out, will depend the ultimate making or marring of the whole structure. Hence the supreme necessity, in connection with magical presentation, for obtaining a thorough knowledge of such general principles as may be derived from experience and logical reasoning. The subject is admittedly one of extreme complexity, and simply bristles with controversial details. It can never be reduced to even the semblance of an exact science, but must be dealt with upon broad lines, capable of general application. Still, even when we confine our attention to simple generalities, and allow a wide margin of elasticity in the few principles which may be established, there are many valuable truths to be ascertained by discussing the subject. We shall therefore endeavor to reason out such truths as may serve for our guidance in the presentation of magical effects.

In the forefront of our discussion, we must undoubtedly place the consideration of matters relating to the personal characteristics of a performer. A striking personality is an accidental advantage. It may be of great assistance in the practice of art; yet, in itself, it is not art but chance. There are many performers who, without the possession of attractive personality or natural distinction, contrive to make their work effective in the highest degree-to hold the attention and gain the appreciation of their audiences, completely and invariably.

Now that clearly is art. It *must* be so, since it is not due to the normal operations of nature.

On the other hand, there are men of charming personality who, in spite of the natural advantages they possess, can never render their efforts convincing to an audience-men who, in private, would appear to be gifted with qualities which could not fail to command public appreciation; and yet, who fail to touch even the fringe of success in stage work or other modes of presentation. This represents the utter negation of art, and is simply a misuse of valuable possessions. Instances of artistic failure of this kind will occur to the mind of everyone who reads these lines. Such instances clearly show that a striking personality, when divorced from the essential requirements of artistic presentation, may be of as little value as technical perfection which is accompanied by similar deficiencies.

In either case, there is just the one thing lacking without which success is impossible. That is, the knowledge of how to adapt personal qualifications to public service-in other words, to present what is shown in a way that will appeal to the average spectator. Attractive personality is a good thing to possess. So, also, is technical ability. But neither of those good qualities singly, nor both in conjunction, will serve to make the performer an artist. Something more is necessary. *He must understand the proper method of displaying his qualifications.* Given that understanding, he has every reasonable hope for success, however limited his personal advantages, natural or acquired. Without that understanding, his prospects are usually hopeless, no matter what personal charm or ability he may possess. Herein we perceive the importance of learning all we possibly can, in connection with this present section of our inquiry. The path of knowledge cannot be otherwise than thorny and full of obstructions. But every step we take is bound to render the next easier, and to lead us nearer to success.

It is clear that the object of presentation comprises two prime factors, upon which all our calculations must be based. Those factors are "personality" and "procedure." Upon the establishment of a proper relation between them-that is, their mutual adaptation to a definite purpose-the artistic success of any performer must ultimately depend. They are both variable factors; and, usually, they are variable within wide limits, though not necessarily so. The greater their variability, the wider will be the performer's range of efficiency, and the more numerous his opportunities for achieving success. Practically, this means that the higher a performer's ability as an actor, the less will his field of operation be circumscribed and the greater will be his qualifications as a magician. Conversely, the greater the diversity of procedure available in connection with a magical effect, the more readily may its presentation be made to harmonize with the personal characteristics of the performer. In this case the effect becomes more generally available to magicians as a body, because the procedure can easily be modified to suit various individualities. The main principle underlying these considerations may be stated in the form of a practical rule, thus:

(22) No magician should ever present, in public, any magical feat in which the Procedure cannot be, or has not been, adapted to his own personal characteristics and abilities.

However good an effect may be, and however desirable its inclusion in the performer's repertoire, he should reject it altogether if its presentation involves any essential feature

which he cannot readily provide. If the necessary "business" includes either important details or general methods, at variance with the artist's stage presence, mentality, or personal aptitude, he should throw aside all idea of attempting the presentation. In like manner, if there is need for any form of manual dexterity, or other skill, which the performer has but indifferently acquired, he should wait until that deficiency has been made good before he tries the thing in public. If the acquisition of that essential skill proves to be beyond his capability, he should sacrifice the production unhesitatingly. However reluctantly the sacrifice may have to be made, there can be no question as to the need for making it. In any case of this nature, the wish should be subject to the will, and the latter to common sense. The performer who cannot bring himself to make a sacrifice of this kind will never justify his claim to be regarded as an artist. He may, of course, form mistaken ideas of his qualifications and characteristics, but that is another matter. As an artist, he is bound to do the best that is in him; and, at the same time, endeavor to reject everything imperfect. It is impossible that he can always succeed-but he will always try.

In every walk of life, the same general principles hold good. No two men are precisely alike in constitution or capability. Therefore, no two men can exhibit any artistic accomplishment in identical manner and equally well. This is especially true in relation to the public exhibition of ephemeral arts, such as magic. No two actors, for example, have ever played "Hamlet" in exactly the same way, or with equal success. Indeed, the character has been attempted by some who, although possessing undoubted histrionic genius, have shown themselves incompetent to represent the Dane as Shakespeare portrayed him. Their failure has been obviously due to the fact that they did not sufficiently understand their natural limitations. That is a fault which invariably brings its own punishment, sooner or later. Every living man has limitations, beyond which he becomes incompetent. The wise man, whether artist or artisan, will endeavor to learn the nature of his limitations and to keep his work well within them.

A natural gift for doing certain things with facility is a common characteristic. In addition to that, most people possess an aptitude for learning to do certain things, which are not exactly in accordance with their natural bent. Anything beyond this, however, must necessarily approach a person's limit of efficiency, at the best; and may very readily be altogether beyond his natural limitations. Ordinarily, when a man finds himself lacking in aptitude in certain directions, he acquires an unconquerable aversion to attempting that which presents so much difficulty. But unfortunately we sometimes meet with persons whose utmost desire is the achievement of success in directions which, for them, can but lead to absolute failure. Thus, we find the man who by nature is qualified to raise the process of "grinning through a horse collar" to the dignity of a fine art, is ambitious to shine as a poetic idealist. Instead of doing the thing for which he was intended by nature, he wants to discourse upon "Pictures, Taste, Shakespeare, and the Musical Glasses." Similarly, the man who has no spark of humor in his composition, cherishes the dream of becoming famous as a comedian. Such men, of course, are abnormal; but they are by no means uncommon. They may be found, here and there, among magicians. Yet, in connection with magic, there is no valid reason why any man should form a mistaken estimate of his own capabilities, or experience a

moment's doubt as to what he should or should not present in public. We may state a practical rule, which is merely the embodiment of a truism, and should prevent all possible doubt of the kind mentioned. It is this:--

(23) Never attempt, in public, anything that cannot be performed with the utmost ease in private.

Anything that cannot be done with facility cannot be done properly. Yet, on the part of public performers, magicians included we often find an apparent disregard of that self-evident fact. The spectacle of a performer attempting to present in public magical feats which obviously have not passed beyond the stage of difficulty in private practice, is by no means unusual. The effect produced in the minds of spectators by witnessing such presentations is invariably of a most deplorable character. An audience subjected to such an ordeal cannot fail to be either distressed, or moved to sarcastic laughter. So far as the performer's success is concerned, it does not matter which of those two results is produced. There is nothing to choose between them, for they are equally disastrous. Whether the audience feels sorry for the performer, or feels inclined to "guy" him, makes no difference in the end; because, either way, the end is failure, writ large. An entertainer-magician or otherwise-must be able to make his audience think and feel as he chooses, not as accident may decide. He may excite laughter or arouse sympathy, but it must be on account of his art, not himself. Whatever impressions his spectators receive should be due to an interest in what he is presenting, and not to his own shortcomings. The audience should be made to laugh with him, not at him; to grieve in sympathy with his artistic suggestions, not in pity for his inartistic failures.

One would think that the strained relations which, in cases of immature or otherwise defective presentations, always exist between a performer and his audience, must necessarily provide a wholesome corrective for such errors. But unfortunately some performers appear to be so incurably afflicted with megalomania-in other words, "swelled head"-that their failures never come home to them. They seem unable to conceive the possibility of failing to compel any audience to fall down and worship the divinity of whatever they choose to present. Theirs is the primrose path, the easy pursuit of art, because of the transcendent gifts with which nature has endowed them! Other men, less favored than themselves, may no doubt find it necessary to labor in the vineyards of art, in order to achieve success. It is only fit and proper for such poor creatures to earn their bread by toil, and with difficulty. Let them do so, since they can do no better. The supremely gifted geniuses, to whom the conquest of art has been rendered a mere holiday task, have no need for such personal effort as others make. The king can do no wrong, and they can do nothing that is not right! Why should genius trouble about what it is going to present to a public audience? It will be all right on the night!

Will it? No! almost certainly, it will be all wrong. Men who are capable of arguing in that way are not artists in any sense of the term, and never will be. In connection with art of any and every kind, there are many things which necessarily are open to question, and admit the possibility of dispute. There is, however, one point upon which no question can be raised, and no dispute is possible. That is, no matter how great may be

the natural ability of any man, he can only achieve artistic success by means of great and persistent effort. Those who think otherwise, and act up to their convictions, are almost certain to fail. Now and then, of course, one of them may be lucky enough to meet with success-of a kind; but it will not, it cannot, be artistic success. He will be a "mushroom man." He will spring up in a night, as it were, and disappear the next day. His only chance of permanent benefit will lie in making all the profit he can during his brief period of popularity. After that, the public will have found him out, and will consign him to the oblivion that awaits all such impostors as he.

Year after year, such men constantly come and go. The lesson taught thereby should be self-evident to anyone who has normal intelligence. In magic, above all other arts, the phrase "all right on the night" has no place, except by way of sarcasm. Whatever is not entirely right before the night arrives, will be found all wrong as sure as fate. It is an experience common to all men to find that, on any special occasion, such as the production of a magical effect for the first time in public, everything that can go wrong will go wrong. Whether we must attribute this to the malignity of matter or to the total depravity of inanimate things, whether the exciting cause is hurry, worry, or what not, the fact remains.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER X

REHEARSAL

A MAGICAL effect of whatever kind, and by whomsoever presented, can be made a public success only by unremitting care and labor. Systematic attention to details and refinement of procedure are required. And such attention and refinement can only be provided by means of adequate rehearsal. The rule suggested by these considerations would be too obvious to require statement, were it not so obvious that it is in danger of being overlooked. It is this:

(24) Never present in public any performance, which has not been most perfectly rehearsed-first in detail, and finally as a whole.

In reality, there is far more in that simple rule than appears on the surface. It opens out and partly defines a point of great importance in practice. Merely to say that everything should be properly rehearsed is very much like telling a pugilist to "go in and win." The fighting-man will go in and win, and the performer will rehearse everything properly without being told to do so. That kind of advice is too plentiful to be of much value, anyhow. What both those men want to be told is how to do the thing. Given that knowledge, further instruction becomes superfluous. In the case of the pugilist, we have no suggestion to offer in this respect; and, if we had, there might be some danger in offering it. The entertainer, however, stands in another category. In his case, we have opinions of a more or less strongly developed character, which have been gained both in conducting rehearsals ourselves, and in watching other people conduct them. Thirty years or more of that sort of thing naturally tends to create decided views as to the proper way of doing it, and removes all diffidence in connection with speaking one's mind. Such being our position in the matter we shall proceed to state our views accordingly.

So far as we can see, there is only one way in which a presentation can be properly rehearsed. That is, as indicated in the foregoing rule, to take everything in detail first of all and gradually combine the perfected details until the whole is gone through, precisely as it will be performed in public. To proceed in any other manner is bound to incur waste of time at the moment, and imperfection (possibly serious) in the ultimate result. Haphazard rehearsal, "catch-as-catch-can" style, however prolonged, can never be really efficient. One of the greatest dangers to be guarded against is over-rehearsal.

Some people, as we all know, hold the belief that it is impossible to give a production too much rehearsal. That is one of the wildest fallacies imaginable. Yet, at the same time, we should bear in mind the seeming paradox that a presentation may have been rehearsed to death without, in reality, having had half enough rehearsal. This, of course, requires some explanation; but, properly understood, it becomes clear to the verge of platitude. And, after due consideration of the point of issue, we think that none can doubt the fact that-, so long as a production is efficiently rehearsed, the less rehearsal it has the better it will be. In other words, effort should always be made to curtail the rehearsal necessary, by getting as much value as possible out of the time devoted to it.

By way of elucidating this subject, it is only necessary to explain the reasons to which the dangers of over-rehearsal are due. Broadly speaking, there are two of prime importance, and to these two we may confine our attention, so far as present purposes are concerned. No doubt, there are many others of minor consequence; but if we succeed in proving the main points, all the rest may be neglected. Firstly, then, excessive rehearsal produces a sense of weariness, and destroys interest in the work to be done. Thus, all concerned tend to become perfunctory in the discharge of their duties. Secondly, an undue continuance of rehearsal tends to make those in authority lose their sense of proportion. They become unable to determine the relative importance of details, and lack of a proper grasp of the true essentials. This second danger is by far the greater of the two, inasmuch as it militates against the very object which the rehearsals are intended to promote. What always follows in such a case is that, the longer the rehearsals go on, the more stale and incompetent will everybody become-especially the man in charge of affairs. The latter person, in fact, eventually becomes reduced to a state of abject hopelessness, without a particle of faith to sustain him. Surely, it stands to reason that this cannot be the proper way to conduct rehearsals. When every subordinate is worn out, and those at the head of affairs have lost all understanding of the difference between good and bad and of the matters which determine success or failure, there is bound to be waste of effort, to say the least. Instead of being devoted to making progress, the time is wasted in hurrying to and fro, without getting any "farrarder."

From what has been said, it follows that the most important matter connected with rehearsal is the organization of procedure upon proper lines. The readiest way to impress upon readers the truth of that statement will be to give an accurate description of the manner in which the haphazard method works. We could quote an example from among our own experiences in various theaters, but we prefer not to risk a charge of wilful exaggeration. We shall therefore quote an authority against whom no breath of suspicion can be whispered-to wit, Count Leo Tolstoy. His description of an opera-rehearsal on the happy-go-lucky system will serve to illustrate this point perfectly. One has only to modify the description in detail to understand how it might equally well apply to the rehearsal of some magical presentation. Here is Tolstoy's statement:

"On an elevation between two lamps with reflectors, and in an armchair placed before a music-stand, sat a director of the musical part, baton in

hand, managing the orchestra and singers, and in general the production of the whole opera.

"The performance had already commenced, and on the stage a procession of Indians who had brought home a bride was being represented. Besides men and women in costume, two other men in ordinary clothes bustled and ran about on the stage; one was the director of the dramatic part, and the other, who stepped about in soft shoes and ran from place to place with unusual agility, was the dancing-master, whose salary per month exceeded what ten laborers earn in a year.

"These three directors arranged the singing, the orchestra, and the procession. The procession, as usual, was enacted by couples, with tin foil halberds on their shoulders. They all came from one place, and walked round and round again, and then stopped. The procession took a long time to arrange: first the Indians with halberds came on too late; then too soon; then at the right time, but crowded together at the exit; then they did not crowd, but arranged themselves badly at the sides of the stage; and each time the whole performance was stopped and recommenced from the beginning. The procession was introduced by a recitative, delivered by a man dressed up like some variety of Turk, who, opening his mouth in a curious way, sang, 'Home I bring the bri-i-ide.' He sings and waves his arm (which is, of course, bare) from under his mantle. The procession commences, but here the French horn, in the accompaniment of the recitative, does something wrong; and the director, with a shudder as if some catastrophe had occurred, raps with his stick on the stand. All is stopped, and the director, turning to the orchestra, attacks the French horn, scolding him in the rudest terms, as cabmen abuse each other, for taking the wrong note. And again the whole thing recommences. The Indians with their halberds again come on, treading softly in their extraordinary boots; again the singer sings, 'Home I bring the bri-i-ide.' But here the pairs get too close together. More raps with the stick, more scolding, and a recommencement. Again, 'Home I bring the bri-i-ide' again the same gesticulation with the bare arm from under the mantle, and again, and again the couples, treading softly with halberds on their shoulders, some with sad and serious faces, some talking and smiling, arrange themselves in a circle and begin to sing. All seems to be going well, but again the stick raps, and the director, in a distressed and angry voice, begins to scold the men and women of the chorus. It appears that when singing they had omitted to raise their hands from time to time in sign of animation. 'Are you all dead or what? Cows that you are! Are you corpses, that you can't move?' Again they recommence, 'Home I bring the bri-i-ide,' and again, with sorrowful faces, the chorus women sing, first one and then another of them raising their hands. But two chorus girls speak to each other,--again a more vehement rapping with the stick. 'Have you come here to talk? Can't you gossip at home? You there in red

breeches, come nearer. Look towards me! Recommence!' Again 'Home I bring the bri-i-ide.' And so it goes on for one, two, three hours. The whole of such a rehearsal lasts six hours on end. Raps with the stick, repetitions, placings, corrections of the singers, of the orchestra, of the procession, of the dancers,--all seasoned with angry scolding. I heard the words, 'asses,' 'fools,' 'idiots,' 'swine' addressed to the musicians and singers at least forty times in the course of an hour."

No wonder Tolstoy felt impelled to dip his pen in vitriol and to condemn such proceedings with all the force of invective at his command. No wonder he was led to protest violently against the commission of such crimes in the name of art. No wonder he was filled with contempt, even for the opera itself; although, from his account, it appears to have been founded upon the most beautiful, perhaps, of Moore's poems--"Lalla Rookh." Worst of all, is the fact that there cannot be the slightest doubt of Tolstoy's accuracy in this matter, either in substance or detail. The palpable fact that he had an axe to grind in this connection must be admitted, of course; but for all that, his integrity is too well known to permit of anyone to question his statement, in any essential particular.

Surely every man whose head was made for use and not ornament must agree that such rehearsals cannot be efficient. Proceedings of that kind, if recounted in a court of law, would most certainly be regarded as evidence of incapacity on the part of the men in authority. No business man--and, above all, no artist--could ever believe such a Ballyhooly to be the proper means for producing a work of art. The amenities of Donnybrook Fair cannot represent the standard for artistic procedure; and, in order to achieve artistic success, it can scarcely be requisite for artists to emulate the conduct of Kilkenny cats. We apologize for this sequence of similes, drawn from the Sister Isle, but it is not our fault that they happen to fit the case like a sticking-plaster.

Imagine the absurdity of having the Musical Director, Stage-Manager, Ballet Master, Principals, Chorus, Ballet, and Supers, all tumbling over one another in that manner. Why on earth were all those people huddled together on the stage, trying to act in concert when they had not yet learned what was required of them individually? Think of the chaos that must have attended the efforts of such crowded incompetency! Nearly everything was bound to go wrong; and, at each mistake, the whole crowd had to halt, go back to a certain point and start again. The waste of time resulting from such idiotic procedure is lamentable in the extreme. Let the reader try to put himself in the place of that singer who had the job of bringing home the "bri-i-de!" He must have had a high opinion of the ability possessed by his Management. No matter which of the assembled inefficients went wrong, he was pulled up, ordered to go back to the beginning of his recitative, and made to sing it all over again. And the same with everyone else. All of them marking time after each step forward and usually, taking three steps back afterward. This certainly "gives furiously to think," as they say across the channel.

Then, again, consider the discipline of the subordinates, as shown in Tolstoy's account. It was like the snakes in Norway, non-existent. One might safely predict that no

assemblage of men and women could be found who would do better in surroundings of that kind. They could maintain no shred of interest in their work. They could see no possible object in paying attention to business, when nothing really mattered. But, when the harassed Musical Director happened to notice somebody chattering, he naturally expressed his opinion in terms of magnitude.

The whole system was obviously wrong. Some may perhaps argue that when time is short, it is impossible to adopt any other course. We contend, however, that the shorter the time available, the greater the need for making the most of it. If one has not time to manage a production systematically, there cannot be time to muddle through with it. The rational way of going about the business would have been as follows.

The first essential in any production is the avoidance of divided authority. There can be only one "producer," who must be in supreme command. But, at the same time, since he alone cannot do all the work, he must not interfere with the minor authority delegated to others. In the case of this particular opera, the Musical Director was also the producer, and properly so. In a magical production, the supreme head of affairs would similarly be a magician. Had he been a capable producer, he would never have allowed everything to be rehearsed at once, in that way. At the outset, he would have assigned to each of his subordinate officials their respective duties; and he and they would each have given the performers, in their own individual departments, all necessary instructions. To every important member of the company, written instructions would have been issued for private study. While the principals were studying their parts, the supers and other subordinate performers would have been called for rehearsal in their respective groups. Simultaneously, the orchestra would have been rehearsed, apart from the stage performers. After that, the principal singers and actors would have been called to rehearsal with the orchestra. Then each group of minor artists would have been attended to in the same way. Then, and not until then, would a general rehearsal have been called. Not until then would everybody have been brought together upon the stage, and expected to attempt combined action.

That would be the time when the producer took general command. He should then find that, in the main, every performer knew exactly what he had to do, and where he had to stand. All the producer would have to do would consist in dovetailing the work of the various departments into one harmonious whole. Whatever he might have to say about the work of any particular department, he would say it to the director of that department and not to the subordinates. What any director might want to say to his own people would have to wait until the general rehearsal had ended. The proceedings would not be stopped and everybody kept waiting, while the Ballet Master scolded his dancers, the Stage-Manager called over the coals his supers, stage-hands, extras, and assistants galore, or the Conductor gave his French horn socks.

According to Tolstoy's account, the Musical Director appeared to be attending to everything connected with the opera, and trying to combine the duties of all the directors. If he had to teach and direct all the crowd, what did he want with such people as the Stage-Manager and the Ballet Master? There is no sense in keeping a dog and doing the barking oneself. Besides, in a big production, it is impossible for

one man to be both chief cook and bottle-washer in that way.

Wagner, we know, tried to do everything himself in the way of supervision. He knew one branch of his productions thoroughly-the musical department. This was surely enough for one lifetime, as things go. But in addition to that he was Author, Producer, Stage-Manager, Ballet Master, Scenic Artist, Costumier, Lighting Expert, Stage Foreman, Property Man, and everything else, all rolled into one. It is heresy to say so, but sitting through a Wagner opera is, to us, a painful ordeal. In spite of the grandeur of the music, the absurdities in drama and stage-craft, to everyone with a sense of humor, cannot fail to be irresistibly comic. Wagner should be heard, not seen. Our culminating experience of Wagner as performed on the stage, was in witnessing the second act of "Die Walküre" in Vienna. Never again! The tortures of suppressed laughter we underwent were too great for words.

It is a mistake to try to do too much. A producer must necessarily know many things. He must have a general knowledge of the work connected with every department of his production. But he cannot do, and must not attempt, the work which should be done by expert specialists in each department. He must be able to say when anything whatever is not right; he may even have expert knowledge and experience in one or two directions; but he cannot know everything and do everything essential to a great production. The ideal producer is the man who can direct the efforts of his colleagues, in such manner as to bring about the combined effect he has conceived, and which he knows to be essential to success.

We shall now proceed to deal with the application of the foregoing illustrations, and of the conclusions to be drawn therefrom, to the procedure advisable, first in the case of purely magical productions, and then in connection with magic and drama combined.

In the rehearsal of magical presentations, the need for avoiding confusion is even more pronounced than in the case of drama. Performers have more to think about in magical work than in other forms of stage business. A magician has not only to play his part as an actor; but simultaneously he has to give adequate attention to technical details, which involve considerable difficulty as a rule. In addition to these matters, he is often obliged to study his audience, and adapt his procedure to the requirements of the moment. Compared with the actor's task of playing a set part, the magician's duties are far more complex, and more difficult to perform. Therefore, he requires every advantage to be derived from thorough preparation.

In the case of a single-handed performer, of course, the matter is comparatively simple. Yet even in his case, systematic procedure will yield better results than haphazard working. His first step should be to get the purely magical part of his work more or less complete. Until that is well in hand, he cannot expect to give proper attention to the requirements of actual presentation. When he has arrived at the knowledge of what must be done to render his effects presentable, he will be in a position to decide upon the best way of presenting them. Naturally, while rehearsing the magical details, he will conceive ideas relating to appropriate patter and business. These he should note down for future reference, without flying off at a tangent and

allowing his attention to wander from the work in hand to details of presentation which, at that stage, cannot possibly be decided. In trying to do two things at once, in that way, he can only waste time. The chances are ten to one that if he cannot avoid the temptation to imagine what the end of his work will be, while he has still to complete the beginning, more than half the ideas he elaborates will have to be rejected. There is also the danger that in attempting too much at once, he will lose sight of many important details which otherwise would have attracted his attention. When he gets on the stage, he will be compelled to attend to several things at the same moment. He should, for that very reason, attend to one thing at a time, while he has the opportunity for so doing.

Having brought his magical details to some degree of perfection, and made notes of any ideas that have occurred to him in relation to the staging of his effects, the performer even then is not ready to rehearse his presentation. He has still to decide upon the word and action appropriate to each moment occupied by his stage-work. The incidental patter and business must be prepared before he can reasonably hope to make efficient progress. The fact is, after the purely magical *technique* has been mastered, the magician is required to throw aside, for the moment, his own special work, and take up the dramatic side of his art. He has to prepare himself for playing his part upon the stage, as an actor. To this end, he must become a dramatic author, in addition to fulfilling his other duties. Even though he may be preparing a "silent act," he has still the dramatic "business" to arrange; and that, after all, is the most important element of drama. When his presentation includes patter also, he has a "speaking-part" to write and play.

This being the case, his proper course is obvious. Firstly, he should sit down and write out his part--words and business--precisely as though he were a dramatist writing a play. Secondly, having done his duty as an author, he should learn his part, precisely as though he were an actor, pure and simple. Then, and not until then, will he be in a position to commence the rehearsal of his work *as a presentation*. That is the earliest moment at which he will be competent to rehearse, on the stage, the production he intends to present on the stage.

From this point onward, the whole procedure should be, so far as possible, conducted as though an audience were present. There is some difficulty in so doing, no doubt. Empty seats are a poor substitute for an audience. Cold blood is a very indifferent stimulus, in comparison with the excitement of a public performance. The circumstances are not well adapted to calling forth a performer's reserve force, nor are they calculated to aid him in displaying his ability. Those drawbacks, however, have to be faced at rehearsal by all performers alike. The magical performer cannot expect to provide an exception to that universal rule. The only way in which his presentation can be efficiently rehearsed is for him to imagine the empty seats are filled, to address them as "Ladies and Gentlemen," and go through the performance as it will be given "on the night."

A young performer often imagines that the ease of manner and ready flow of language possessed by his seniors are more or less spontaneous in origin. Even when he has

seen a prominent artist present a certain effect several times, and has noted that the pater and business do not vary, he merely concludes that the performer has got into the way of doing and saying the same thing at the same time. But the fact is that practically every word and action has been most carefully rehearsed, before the presentation was ever put before the public. Nothing is ever left to chance by an artist. As we have already pointed out, art and chance are entirely antagonistic. All that seeming spontaneity, all that ease of deportment and delivery, are the result of careful preparation. They depend upon an adherence to artistic principles and methods, rather than upon natural self-possession or personal resource. It is only in accidental circumstances that ready wit and promptitude are called into play. Apart from such contingencies, an artist always knows beforehand what he intends to say and do. Relieved of all anxiety in that direction, his mind is free to attend to the work of actual presentation. If his attention is diverted from, the work in hand by constant anxiety concerning details of which he is uncertain, he can never do his best. His performance, consequently, is bound to suffer to the precise extent of the anxiety he feels.

The general handicap due to nervousness, from which all artists suffer more or less, cannot be eliminated by any amount of rehearsal. It is the penalty an artist has to pay for having gained a proper understanding of his responsibilities. Knowing, as he does, the full requirements of his art, he is inclined to doubt his ability to perform' his duties efficiently. That feeling, in its acute form, usually wears off with some rapidity, even during the first presentation of a new effect. As the performance proceeds, and everything goes aright, the artist gains confidence from the knowledge that his preparations have been properly made and, in all probability, he has no reason to dread failure.

When we see a performer who, with the utmost assurance and self-conceit, starts off to present a new effect in public, we need feel no uncertainty in "sizing up" his merit as an artist. He cannot possibly realize his true position, nor the nature of his responsibilities. He is confident of success, for the simple reason that he does not understand how serious would be the result of failure. His courage is born of mental deficiency, not of artistic intelligence. When, however, his over-confidence leads to disaster, he obtains a glimmering notion of something lacking in the scheme of creation which has launched him adrift upon the ocean of life.

There is an anecdote related of two officers who served in the Crimean War. One was a Major Smith-let us say-and the other we shall call Captain Brown. Smith was a man who possessed a great amount of brute courage. He knew no fear, because he could not understand danger. Brown, on the other hand, was a man who thoroughly realized danger, but was dominated by a sense of duty and responsibility. During one particular action, Smith was riding along the ranks and noticed Brown, very pale and anxious, standing at his post. The Major pulled up his horse and said, "Hullo, Brown! You look frightened!" Brown very quietly replied, "Yes, I am frightened. If you were half so frightened as I am, you would run away."

In this little story, we have a complete analogy to the excessive confidence of the incompetent performer, and the natural diffidence and nervousness of a real artist. The

man who knows no fear requires no courage. His education is defective. He is confident because he lacks knowledge. The man who understands danger, and faces it all the same, has true courage. He has been properly educated. He knows the extent of his responsibilities and has learned how to do his duty as it should be done. That is the kind of man to whom the title of artist may be justly assigned, not to the man rendered confident by ignorance and mental obtuseness.

Passing on to the rehearsal of presentations in which magic and drama are-combined, a very slight amplification of what has been said is all that is needed. The same general principle of rehearsal in detail applies to this case also. The dramatic side of the question merely adds a further department of specialization. Incidentally, of course, it adds a further cause of possible confusion in rehearsal; and one which, unless due precautions are taken, will produce great waste of time in the first place, and, ultimately, defective presentation.

The procedure to be recommended in this instance, although it may sometimes appear to involve loss of time, is to keep the magical and dramatic sides of the production entirely separate, until such time as both have been well rehearsed. In many cases, this may be thought equivalent to going the longest way round to the end in view. Appearances, however, are deceptive; and, in such matters, the longest way round is usually the shortest way home, in point of time. To rehearse the whole combination before its individual components have been brought to a reasonable degree of perfection, can but be to reproduce the conditions described by Tolstoy in the account we have quoted.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER XI

SPEED IN PRESENTATION

IN MAGIC, speed in presentation is a most important point, artistically speaking.

There are some performers who, with half a dozen simple tricks, can fill up a two-hour entertainment. Others there are who can rattle off a score of big effects in as many minutes. Each class of performer, no doubt, thinks his own method of presentation the best that can be devised. So it may be-for him. But the question is, which method, if either, is best for the art of magic? Allowing for adaptation to personal characteristics, there must be a certain standard in this respect toward the attainment of which a magical artist's aim should be directed. We want to ascertain the logical basis upon which some such standard may be founded. Hence, in the first place, we must think out the various points bearing upon this subject, and afterward, make up our minds as to the conclusion one may deduce from the facts of the case.

Each particular mode of presentation, in point of showmanship, has certain advantages. The rapid method undoubtedly has the advantage of giving the spectators plenty for their money. That is to say, plenty of magic; which presumably is the thing they chiefly expect from a magician. The slow method, on the other hand, gives the performer ample opportunity for getting at home with his spectators and making them thoroughly interested in his work. Herein, again, we are bound to admit the existence of great advantages. In completely interesting and carrying conviction to the minds of his audience, a magician unquestionably fulfils the expectations of the public.

From an artistic standpoint, however, each of these methods has its disadvantage. When we consider the final impression produced-and that is the main consideration, so far as art is concerned-we realize that in neither case can there exist the completeness and satisfaction of interest which true art demands. The rapid method imposes so much strain upon the attention of an audience, that complete appreciation of the effect presented can never be gained. The slow method, conversely, does not sufficiently occupy the minds of the spectators in the direction toward which their anticipation has been led. Thus, it is easy to see, both methods are lacking in certain artistic essentials. Each comprises too little of the advantage in which the other excels.

Looking at the matter fairly and squarely, one cannot help feeling that any presentation which leaves an impression of either indistinctness or over-elaboration has a very

serious defect, from whatever point of view it may be regarded. Even setting aside the question of art, high or low, the fact that a performance lacks one or other of the qualities which the public expects a public entertainment to possess is, in itself, sufficient to condemn the method of presentation adopted. From a magical entertainer, the public expects two things--magic and entertainment. The man who gives the public plenty of magic, but serves it up in such hot haste that his audience has no time to digest it, merely surfeits the spectators with that particular requirement, without satisfying their other expectations. He occupies their attention more than enough, but he does not entertain them as they rightly expect to be entertained. They have too much of one good thing and not enough of another. The magic they wish to enjoy, instead of being served up properly, is thrown at them--take it or leave it--just as the waitresses at cheap restaurants dump down the food before their customers. Some people, no doubt, can put up with such treatment. They get used to it, as eels do to being skinned. But surely the person who cannot enjoy a meal better served must have an exceptional constitution. To most people, good service and time for enjoyment are things to be desired. Satisfaction, and not indigestion, is what normal beings appreciate.

On the other hand, the performer who spins out his magical business, by unduly watering it down with patter or other forms of entertainment, displays a fault of another order, but similar in degree. Retaining the simile of the restaurant, one may say the service is far too elaborate and the rations are far too scanty. Or, in the renowned words of a certain governor of North Carolina, we may say, "It's a long time between drinks." The spectators may be greatly entertained by the performance, but when it is all over they feel dissatisfied because they have not obtained what they paid their money to see. In such conditions, the final effect is as incomplete and imperfect as when people have been allowed too little time for appreciation.

There seems little doubt, then, as to the kind of standard to be adopted in this respect. The rapid method may suit some performers well, especially those who either lack repose or dispense with patter. The slow method may recommend itself to those whose strong point is either "a gift of gab" or a special ability in "holding an audience." The question of "personality" or, in other words, individual characteristics both natural and acquired, must be allowed considerable weight in such questions. The man who, although a skilled magician, has no special ability as an entertainer--who has not that easy grip of his spectators' attention which disarms criticism of his procedure at the moment--is bound to rely for his ultimate success upon a more or less rapid method of presentation. The man whose skill is that of an entertainer in the ordinary sense, rather than that of a specialist in magic, has to rely upon his general ability more than upon his magical effects. In his case the comparatively slow method of presentation is essential to success. But "there is reason in the roasting of eggs," as the proverb has it. One man may find it best to go ahead, another to go slowly; but every man who professes to give the public good work should remember that, beyond certain limits, in haste and deliberation alike, good work can scarcely exist.

No reasonable doubt, we think, can be entertained as to the standard of rapidity in presentation which is most desirable in magical performance. The defects inseparable from the respective extremes simply indicate that the happy medium represents

perfection. The audience must have time to understand, to consider, and to appreciate the successive items presented, or the final impression will be confused and imperfect. A magical performance must contain sufficient magic to fulfil the expectations of the audience, or dissatisfaction, more or less acute, is bound to be the after-effect produced. In either case, the ultimate result displays artistic shortcomings, which should be corrected. True art and good policy alike point to the middle course as being best, and to the wisdom of keeping that course so far as circumstances will permit. It is quite possible to give the public plenty of magic without reducing one's performance to the level of a mere "show," devoid of artistic merit. It is also quite possible to give the public real entertainment without stinting the supply of magic. There is no difficulty in the matter, one way or the other. By avoiding redundancy in either direction, the thing is done automatically.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER XII

PATTER

INTIMATELY related to the foregoing subject, is that of "patter" in magical presentations. The diversity of opinion expressed upon this subject has been extreme. Some have held the view that patter is all-important in the art of magic. Others have regarded it as an entirely negligible quantity. Obviously, both views cannot be right; but nevertheless it is quite possible that both may be wrong. Indeed, one may feel practically certain that neither opinion can be altogether correct, however much be said in its support. This seems to be another instance where the truth rests midway between two extremes. The fact is that patter is entirely essential in some cases, and quite unnecessary in others. We shall briefly review the subject in its various aspects.

Firstly, as to the view that patter is the very salt of magic, and indispensable to the art. Let us see what may be said for and against this proposition. It is certain that some well-known experiments cannot conceivably be performed in dumb show; while others, even though they might be given in silence, would lose immeasurably. The former class comprises effects in which the initial procedure demands explanation. This may arise from the fact that members of the audience are required to assist the performer, or for various other reasons. The latter class consists in experiments such as those involving extensive preparation, which might prove tedious if not relieved by appropriate remarks and witticisms, and cases wherein some slight diversion of the spectators' attention is requisite. Instances of each class will readily be recalled to mind. Hence, in one case, to dispense with patter would be simply impossible. In the other case, it would be most unwise. In either case, artistic presentation demands the employment of patter, as an inevitable necessity. Thus, the performer whose repertoire is confined to silent procedure alone, cuts himself adrift, artistically speaking, from a wide range of effects which would otherwise be available for his use. This in itself provides a strong argument in favor of patter. But, at the same time, it in no way represents proof of the contention that patter is indispensable to magic, from an artistic standpoint. It merely proves the value of speech, upon occasion.

Turning to the other side of the question, we undoubtedly find not only effects which lose nothing by being presented in silence, but also a number which must actually gain in artistic value by that mode of presentation. Such are those effects which, on the one hand, include in their performance much that will attract the eye and, on the

other hand, those in which close attention is desirable, on the part of the audience. In neither class can patter be regarded as an artistic essential. On the contrary, the introduction of patter where it must be either unnecessary or detrimental, could only be regarded as an advantage by those to whom the requirements of art are unknown. Anything not requisite or, at the least, not tending to enhance the effect produced, must be a blemish, artistically speaking. Therefore, we are bound to admit that silent presentation *can* be perfectly artistic, and that patter is *not* a necessary constituent of our art, in certain phases.

Most readers, probably, will remember the "Gibson Girl" case, wherein it was sought to prove that the title of "actress" could only be claimed by a lady who played a "speaking part." This contention was vigorously opposed by various witnesses whose opinion is of value. For instance, Mr. Comyns Carr pointed out that Mme. Jane May, whom he believed to be the greatest actress in the world, never played a speaking part but always acted in dumb show. That is not altogether accurate, for we ourselves have seen her play such a part, and also give very clever imitations of other artists, both in speech and song. Still, her strong point is voiceless acting; and it would be absurd to say that, when she ceases to speak and, as in "*L'Enfant Prodigue*," conveys every idea by action, she ceases to be either an actress or an artist.

Once again, we must remember Robert-Houdin's definition of a conjurer as an actor who plays the part of a magician. Or, if we wish to express the same idea in more accurate terms, we may say that a modern magician is an actor playing the part of a legendary magician. In any event, the artist in magic is primarily an actor. His manipulative or technical skill, however necessary to complete success, must be regarded as a secondary consideration, in relation to the artistic side of his calling. Therefore, whatever may be true of other actors is equally true of him. If speech is not essential to art in other branches of dramatic work, it cannot be so in magic. And since speech is ordinarily an adjunct of the highest importance in drama, it must be equally so in our own particular case. It follows that, so long as the silent performer does not introduce effects wherein speech is artistically requisite, and the performer who uses patter does not speak when the purposes of art would be better served by silence, each is equally entitled to rank as an artist in magic. Hard and fast opinions, in either direction, can have no weight in deciding the general question as to the value, or otherwise, of patter. That question is one that cannot be decided upon general principles. It can only be answered in relation to particular conditions. The answer depends entirely upon the artistic requirements of each individual effect, as modified by the circumstances in which it is presented. The rules already set down in this book should provide all the guidance required, at any time, in forming a just opinion in this respect.

This leads us naturally to the consideration of appropriateness in patter. just as there is the need for knowing when one may or should either use or discard patter, it is equally important to know what kind of patter to use if and when necessary. One must not only know when to speak, but also what form of speech to adopt in each instance. Further, it is requisite to know precisely what form of speech one is *capable* of adopting, with proper effect. One may know what ought to be said; but, unless one

can say it properly, it will be better left unsaid. And it is of no use to *think* one knows such things. This is a case wherein it is necessary to make quite sure of one's ground, especially in relation to personal characteristics and capabilities. By study and experience, the ability to form a sound judgment on such points may be acquired; and yet, for personal reasons, the procedure known to be correct may not be the best to adopt. Nothing can be good that is spoiled by improper treatment; and, unless one can carry out the proper mode of procedure in a competent manner, it would be far better to adopt a less perfect method, but one within the range of adequate performance.

As a practical illustration, we shall suppose a performer intends to present a magical item for which the best mode of introduction would be a serious, well written, and impressive address. The points the performer then has to consider are these. Can he be effectively serious and impressive, and can he write well enough to compose the requisite address? If these achievements are well within his power, he need have no hesitation in going ahead. But if, in either respect, his personal limitations stand in the way of successful achievement, he should sacrifice something in mode of procedure, in order to bring the presentation within the scope of his ability. It is always better to do an imperfect thing well than to attempt to attain perfection and fail in the endeavor. The transition from art to balderdash may be made in a single step. The performer who, understanding his art but not realizing his own limitations, undertakes more than he can perform, is almost certain to take that step from the sublime to the ridiculous every time.

In writing patter, of course, a performer may obtain assistance. But, so far as public delivery is concerned, he is bound to do the work himself. If he undertakes to give an address which is intended to be impressive, he should be an elocutionist. If the prevailing note of his address is comedy, he should be a comedian. If what he has to say is pseudo-scientific, he should be at least something of a scientist. And so on, throughout the whole range of possible methods. The complete magician, of course, would possess all such qualifications. But the complete magician has yet to be born. So far, we are all compelled to sacrifice something of ambition, on account of our individual shortcomings.

It is here that the saving grace of good sense steps in, to protect the artist in magic from disaster. With sufficient good sense, a magician may easily steer clear of the rocks, shoals, and quicksands to which his personal limitations might otherwise lead him. So long as he knows and avoids the courses in which, for him, there is no thoroughfare, he is safe. But, directly his good sense fails him, he becomes liable to meet with disaster. The good sense to know wherein he is lacking in education or ability, wherein his physical peculiarities represent obstacles to success, wherein he is entirely competent to do what is required and wherein rests his best chance of gaining public appreciation, undoubtedly provides the best aid to propriety that any man can possess. And fortunately, it is an aid that may be gained by all who will take the trouble to "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" a few simple truths, within the reach of every normal intelligence.

The most obvious of the simple truths to which we have alluded is that the man who

lacks education must either be aware of that fact, or be little better than an idiot. The corollary to this truth is that the performer who, not being an idiot, is aware of his lack of education, will take due precaution to avoid mistakes in speaking. Since he cannot rely upon his own knowledge, he will obtain the advice and assistance of others who possess the education he has not acquired. The performer who is wise enough to know that he lacks education, and yet neglects the precautions which such circumstances dictate, must be a hopelessly self-satisfied duffer. He is past praying for, so far as any semblance of art is concerned. But the performer who, lacking education, yet keeps in constant view the deficiencies from which he suffers and the need for overcoming them, may be as true an artist as though his education were of the best.

Thus, for example, the man who has not learned to speak grammatically must be a fool to speak in public, without first submitting the text of the speech to somebody able to correct the mistakes he is bound to make. The man who has not learned French cannot expect to speak French, except in such manner as to make himself ridiculous, even though he may have consulted someone who knows the language. The performer who does not understand elocution should not speak in public without having rehearsed before someone who can show him where he goes wrong. Above all, the performer whose accent is low class should *never* speak in public when circumstances render such an accent inappropriate.

To a man of brains there can be no difficulty in knowing the right thing to do, so far as these elementary matters are concerned. The very smallest amount of gumption serves to prevent danger from the pitfalls awaiting those who venture beyond the limits of their own knowledge. So, when a performer trips up over some obstacle which proper care would have enabled him to avoid, his reputation as an artist is bound to suffer. And it is not too much to say that of all the blunders a performer can commit, those connected with mistaken speech are the very worst. Consequently, they demand the utmost care in prevention.

In every audience there are sure to be persons to whom verbal errors are as distasteful as sour gooseberries. A grammatical solecism or a defect in pronunciation will, figuratively, set their teeth on edge. What must such people think of a performer who, for instance, calls a phenomenon a "phenomena"? They can only regard him as one whose ability is probably on a par with his education. They will think, and rightly so, that the man who has any capability at all must at least be capable of avoiding the use of terms which he does not understand. The misuse of words cannot be regarded as otherwise than direct evidence of incompetency.

No sensible man can help knowing that all languages abound in "booby-traps," for catching the unwary or unskilled speaker. Consequently, every sensible man will take good care to avoid being caught therein. But there are others; and, unfortunately, some of those others are magicians. It may be worth while to give an illustration of the kind of mess such people too often make of their native English. We shall suppose an address has to be delivered to the following effect:

"The handkerchief that covers the lady's eyes has been examined by several members of the audience, each of whom guarantees that covering to be free from preparation of every kind. Then there can be no one among those present who doubts the fact that, in circumstances such as these, the lady is rendered quite incapable of seeing what takes place around her. Between you and me, however, blindfolding and every similar precaution are alike powerless to destroy the mental sympathy and co-operation that exist between her and myself. Anything communicated either to her or to me becomes instantly known to us both, whatever severity may be exercised in the tests to which either of us has to submit."

Thus rendered the speech is, obviously, both grammatical and sensible. Let us now transcribe it as, without exaggeration, it might be delivered by some performers:

"The yankerchief tied round Maddy Moselle's eyes 'ave been ixamined be several of the audience, each of wich say it is quite unprepared or faked in the ordinary way, as usual in all performances of mental thought telepathy like these. Then everyone in the audience see at once that what we do is quite different altogether, because trickery and deception is beyond suspicion, and prevents any doubt about her knowing wot anyone of you do, and me as well. But, between you and I, blindfolding and all those kind of things makes no difference to the mental sympathies and similar influence which exists between the mind of we two. Whatever you tell us pass from each other, without any possible way of communicating, no matter what severity of difficult tests are exercised by the audience, who want to prove if every single one of our statements are not correct, but entirely without collusion or confederacy."

Thus muddled, the speech obviously becomes neither grammatical nor sensible. Yet everyone who reads these words must occasionally have heard self-styled artists--or probably *artistes*--make hay of the English language in precisely that fashion. Unfortunately, the foregoing is an actual type, rather than a travesty of the diction sometimes inflicted upon audiences. And, one may rest assured, the *artistes* who address educated people in such ruinous phrases are the very men most likely to attach the highest importance to their own achievements as "perfeshnals," and to entertain the greatest contempt for the "amechure."

To digress, for a moment, from our present theme, the term *artiste* recalls a memory of the late Corney Grain. In one of his later sketches, he mentioned the resentment he once felt, on hearing himself described as a "comique." Having all his life given the public genuine comedy, he had justly earned the title of "comedian," in plain English. To be called a "comique" simply implied that his artistic rank was equivalent to that of any French clown who tries to be funny. In like manner, it seems to us, the title of "artiste" adopted by, and accorded to every nonentity and wastrel who disgraces the stage--must be derogatory to the repute of any real artist. When those who cannot even speak the English they are supposed to know, seek aggrandizement by adopting titles from the French they cannot pretend to know, an artist may well consider their ways and do otherwise. Anyhow, the French terms "comique" and "artiste" have their exact equivalents in English; and, to the man whose native language is the latter, the use of such foreign words is entirely needless. For an English-speaking man to call himself

an "artiste" is mere affectation of a most transparent character. He uses the term because it sounds and looks more pretentious than "artist," though its meaning is just the same; and that reason is self-evident.

Reverting to the subject of patter, here are two quotations from Aristotle. He says,--

"The excellence of diction consists in being perspicuous without being mean"; and "In the employment of all the species of unusual words, moderation is necessary: for metaphors, foreign words, or any of the others, improperly used, and with a design to be ridiculous, would produce the same effect." --Poetics, part 2, sec. 26.

That is to say, the improper use of words or phrases is just as ridiculous as though the intention were to provoke ridicule. That Aristotle knew what he was talking about is perfectly clear. Yet we, who were born some two thousand years after his death, still find among us people who do not seem to understand these simple truths. And few there are who trouble about learning the right thing to say, or how to say it properly.

That is not as it should be, by any means. The human race has existed for some considerable time. During that period, a fair amount of knowledge has been gathered and made readily accessible to all, in every department of human activity. The man who, instead of learning what has been boiled down for his information trusts to luck in finding out for himself what others discovered ages before he was born, cannot have sense enough "to come in out of the rain." Anyhow, the performer who stands before educated people with the intention of addressing them in a manner that will impress them favorably, must use the language that educated people speak. In so far as he fails to speak correctly, he will suffer ridicule and lose prestige. He should be master of his own language, though not necessarily a *schoolmaster*. Pedantry, indeed, is entirely objectionable; but there is nothing pedantic in speaking properly.

It is impossible to say here all that need be said upon the subject of patter. An entire treatise might, with advantage, be written upon it. But, before quitting the subject, there are one or two points to which we must refer. The first concerns the practice of making remarks calculated to bring magic into contempt. For example, a magical humorist can be funny without making fun of his art. If he says things which tend to lower the public estimation of magic and magicians, he not only degrades himself and his performance, but reflects discredit upon the whole magical profession. We cannot expect to raise the standing of magic and magicians, if the latter persist in debasing their profession by uncalled-for japes and "wheezes," which present their calling in a false light. What respect can the public have for men who do not respect their own work? The only possible sentiment that can be aroused is contempt, pure and simple. jokes in which magic is allied to humbug, swindling or chicanery of any kind, can only serve to rank the magician among swindlers and impostors.

Although patter of that kind is, perhaps, the most detrimental to our general interests, there are other forms scarcely less objectionable in practice. Among these the practice of "talking at" the audience has a prominent place. People do not like to be talked at, whether they deserve it or not. In fact, the more they deserve it, the less they relish it. When, for instance, a performer finds his audience undemonstrative the very worst

plan he can adopt is to show resentment or to make remarks concerning that fact. To do anything of the kind can only result in making the spectators self-conscious, and more than ever reluctant to show appreciation. The people in front of the footlights must, if possible, be taken out of themselves—must be led to forget their own concerns, and made to think only of the performance they are witnessing. If induced to reflect upon the relations existing between the performer and themselves, and made to feel uncomfortable about what he thinks of them, spontaneous appreciation and enjoyment become impossible. All chance of pleasure in the entertainment is destroyed, both for them and for him.

In the same way, references to the hypothetical poverty of magicians as a class cannot be otherwise than detrimental to us all. Not only so, the poverty of artists generally has formed a stock subject for jesters since time immemorial. That subject has been done to death, and should be dropped entirely. The old jokes still raise a laugh, because some people can only see the jokes they know; but most people have long been sick of such antiquated substitutes for wit.

Worse still are references to the possible poverty of spectators. It is bad enough to find a performer suggesting his own familiarity with the pawn-shop, or his chronic inability to produce a shilling. But when such jests are made at the expense of the audience, the fault is ten thousand times more reprehensible. Such themes are not agreeable to anyone. What must they suggest to (say) the man who has attended a performance in the hope of finding relief from the memory of financial troubles? Even the careless youth who has pawned his watch in order to get money for giving his best girl a treat, cannot feel very happy when topics of this kind are brought up. Surely, then, a performer will act wisely in refraining from the use of such debilitated jokes as, "I can see a good many chains, but I suppose all your watches have gone to be repaired, just as mine has." There would be nothing particularly witty about such remarks, even were they original. When let off upon an audience at forty-secondhand, they have no pretense of merit, nor can they add anything to the general effect of a performance.

Then, again, remarks concerning the suitability of a performance to a juvenile audience are undoubtedly objectionable. One often hears a magician make a sort of apology for introducing a certain item, on the ground that "so many young people are present." Could there be any readier method of bringing that item into contempt? Probably not. To present the thing as being especially suited to the mental capacity of juveniles must suggest to the adults that what they are about to see is beneath their appreciation. As to the juveniles themselves, the result is even more disastrous.

If there is one ambition more common than another to the youthful of either sex, it is the ambition to appear "grown up" so far as may be possible. Hence, the mere fact of saying that what one is about to do will appeal to children especially, is enough to set every juvenile mind against the performance. Every boy, particularly, draws a mental distinction between himself and ordinary "children." Out of courtesy to his juniors and to the opposite sex, he may be disposed to tolerate what pleases children; but he wants to believe that what pleases him really is something that is suited to the

intelligence of his elders. To suggest that he requires children's fare can be nothing less than an insult to his understanding.

The fact is, children understand a great deal more than their seniors usually believe. A public performer, at any rate, should be aware of that fact, and should act accordingly. He has full opportunity for observing how very little there is that escapes the understanding of even quite young children. And if he is capable of learning from experience, he must know that to profess to bring his entertainment down to the level of childish intelligence cannot be good policy, from any point of view whatever.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER XIII

STAGE MANNER AND PERSONALITY

TO A PUBLIC performer, the value of an effective personality is abundantly evident. But, in practice, it is well to understand the extent to which personality alone is comprised in what commonly goes by that name. We believe that, to a great extent, what is called "personality" is by no means a natural possession, "bred in the bone." We regard it as being very frequently a composite manifestation of qualities native and acquired. Habit is second nature, as everybody knows. Therefore, much that passes as personality may be merely acquired habit; and should, correctly speaking, be described as the ability to hold the attention and excite the interest of an audience. That ability, of course, is a personal asset, and one of great value; but it cannot be regarded as one in which personal characteristics are exclusively involved. Such influence over an audience is often due to nothing more than a thorough knowledge of one's business, combined with the confidence due to long experience. It is mainly an acquired habit, and but slightly associated with real personality.

There may be--indeed, there *are*--instances in which a performer's sole claim to public appreciation has been derived from pleasing characteristics which nature bestowed upon him. But on the other hand, there have been performers who, although possessed of no such natural advantages, could exercise upon an audience all the magnetic influence that attractive personality could create. Further than that, some performers, so heavily handicapped by nature that one might think them possessed of every quality calculated to inspire aversion, have gained public applause and appreciation. Yes! have even achieved success in circumstances that would condemn many well-favored men to failure. The success attained by such men would no doubt be ascribed by their audiences to "personality." We, however, regard the matter in another light. When a man's natural qualities are in themselves detrimental to his powers of attracting appreciation, it cannot be personality that gains for him success in public. There must be other factors in the problem. There must be something of such value that it not only renders him successful without aid from "personality," but outweighs the detrimental characteristics operating against him, into the bargain.

Such facts as these must have come within the experience of everyone. In view of these facts, there seems but one conclusion that can be rationally accepted. We are bound to conclude that what is called "personality" very often consists in purely artificial

methods acquired by the individual, and not natural to him. In others words, it consists in a knowledge of artistic requirements and of their harmonization with personal peculiarities. By such means, a performer's natural disadvantages may be not only disguised but actually made useful. The man who can achieve this is an artist, beyond all doubt; whereas the man who succeeds by virtue of personality alone, can claim no artistic merit whatever. We owe him no praise for being as nature made him. But to the man who impresses us favorably, in spite of nature's efforts to make him repellent, we owe all the praise that any artist can deserve.

At the root of this matter there is found the principle stated in Robert-Houdin's definition of a conjurer, to which we have so often alluded. The man is an actor, as every magician should be. He does not appear to the audience clothed in his own personality. He assumes, for the time, a personality not his own, but that of the magician he wishes to represent. It is that assumed personality which appeals to his spectators, and is by them regarded as his in fact. They are not allowed to see the man himself, but only the man he intends them to see. Therein we have the highest art, of acting and magic alike. We may call it personality if we will, but in truth it is only personal by acquisition. It is no more a natural endowment than a suit of clothes, bought and paid for. It has been bought by experience and paid for by labor and study.

If this is the true state of the case, as it seems to be, there should exist but few men who are incapable of acquiring a "stage manner" that will pass for effective personality. A satisfactory "stage *presence*," of course, must depend mainly upon the gifts the gods have given. But a satisfactory stage manner is a thing possible of acquirement, at the expense of thought and effort. There may be great difficulty in learning to play the part adopted. In most cases, perhaps, there is bound to be great difficulty. What of that? Almost everything worth doing at all is difficult to do. Hardly anything worth doing is easy to do. It is all in the day's work, anyhow. Inferior work, easy to do, can only succeed by accident. Even then, although it may bring in cash, it will never bring credit. It will be "I easy come, easy go," and there an end. Art is cast in another and a very different mold. And an artist, worthy of the name, cannot expect to have an easy time. The primrose path is not for him. Hard days and short nights are his natural expectation.

It is not difficult to state the requirements of an effective stage manner in general terms. But it is impossible to define the infinitely varied needs of individual performers. What may be best in one case, may be unthinkable in another. In this respect, every performer must be a law unto himself. He may gain much aid from competent criticism of his procedure, but much more depends upon his own judgment and practical experience. His own common sense, properly exercised, should be his best guide. Above all, he should never forget that the opinions of any Tom, Dick, or Harry he may happen to meet will probably be worthless, and that the opinions of paid assistants are sure to be misleading. The man whose bread and butter one provides will naturally say what one would like to hear, even at the expense of his personal convictions, if such he happens to possess. As a rule, his only convictions are derived from his employer. What the "guv'nor" likes must be right. What the "boss" believes, his employee will swear to--especially if he would get sworn at for doing otherwise. Still, when a

performer finds that Tom, Dick, and Harry unanimously agree in a certain opinion, he will do well to consider that opinion dispassionately and seriously.

Confining ourselves to generalities, we may state the requirements of an effective stage manner as follows: First and foremost, we must emphasize the need for cultivating an earnest desire to please. That is absolutely essential to success. The audience can have no expectation other than that of being pleased by the performance paid for. People who pay to see what a performer has to show them, do so for their pleasure. Therefore, it is their pleasure that should have the chief consideration from the man who receives their money. He is not there to please himself.

Next in order of importance may be placed the need for understanding human nature, especially in relation to public gatherings. No man thinks or feels the same at all times. The thoughts and sentiments of all men vary in accordance with circumstances. Humanity in the aggregate differs very little from humanity in the individual. Every audience has its own particular characteristics, just as much as every person. The general character of either, for the time being, depends on the resultant influence of many causes acting together. At a public performance, some of these causes will act in favor of the performer, others will act against him. The resultant influence will vary, from time to time, according to the direction in which the causes preponderate. These are facts with which every performer should be acquainted, and the operation of which he should fully realize. Unless he can understand that audiences are subject to the same accidental influences as affect individuals, and can realize that individuals are merely creatures of circumstance, he is sure to be misled by appearances. He is sure to think that the apparent attitude of the audience toward his performance has a personal relation to himself, either for good or ill. He will think that if the spectators immediately respond to his efforts he is successful; if they do not, that it is hopeless to try to please them. Whereas, in actual fact, he should never pay the slightest attention to the attitude of his spectators. That is an accidental phenomenon, entirely beyond his control.

When a performer goes upon the stage, he should remember that he stands before people who have no personal interest in anything that he does. They may be in the mood to appreciate his work, or they may not. That has nothing to do with him. If the odds are in his favor, so much the better for him. If not, so much the worse. In either case his audience is subject to a variety of influences, to which must be added the influence he himself can create. So far as he is concerned, what he has to do is to make his personal influence operate in his favor, to the utmost. That is all he can do, in any case; and, whatever may be the odds against him, that is what he should do in every case.

Another essential is the maintenance of good humor. Since every audience is subject to the impressions received at the moment, and good humor in the audience is necessary to a performer's success, that is one of the most important impressions he must convey. No matter how ill-humored an audience may be, the man upon the stage must appear to be in good humor. In fact, the more out of humor he may find his audience, the greater the need for a countervailing influence upon his part. His efforts in this direction will

never fail to meet with their due reward.

Diplomacy and expediency may be said to cover the entire ground in this connection. The performer must deal with his audience diplomatically, and act in accordance with the dictates which circumstances show to be expedient. Firmness of purpose, combined with the utmost courtesy, should govern every relation between a performer and his audience. Conscious ability exercised in the service of one's spectators is, perhaps, the most effective aid to success at any time--whatever else a performer may count to his advantage, or wherever he may otherwise fail.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER XIV

MENTAL ATTITUDE

AMONG the characteristics most objectionable in a performer, self-conceit probably takes first place. There is all the difference in the world between this and conscious ability. The latter belongs to the man who knows his own capabilities, which have been acquired by prolonged study and effort. Self-conceit usually denotes the man who knows nothing with certainty but vainly imagines his personal gifts to be superior to all knowledge. Believing himself a heaven-born genius, he constantly proves himself an unmitigated ass. Average audiences will size him up in a moment, and set up their backs accordingly. They could find no pleasure greater than that of taking him down a peg or two. That frame of mind is probably the worst an audience can adopt, so far as a performer's interests are concerned. The good-will of spectators is essential to his success, and their antagonism is to be avoided by every means.

However detrimental to a performer may be the fault of self-conceit, it is scarcely more so than the failing of self-consciousness. Of course, when a performer is naturally self-conscious, he must remain so to the end. He may in time gain great control over his self-consciousness, but he cannot expect to destroy it. Yet, however heavily he may be handicapped by this defect, he must prevent the public from knowing how much he is overweighted, or he will never gain the confidence of his audiences. Some people will pity him; others will ridicule his efforts to entertain them; but, in the whole crowd, there will be none who will believe in him. Therefore, the first aim of every self-conscious performer should be to conceal the nervous affection with which he is afflicted, and which diverts toward his own person some of the attention he should devote exclusively to his work. He must learn the knack of keeping his mind from dwelling upon what spectators think about him. In short, he must realize that nobody cares a straw whether or not his necktie is straight, or his trousers are properly creased down the leg.

The true remedy for this personal failing consists in cultivating the ability to assume a character more or less foreign to one's own. That ability is merely what is demanded of every actor in his daily work. And, as we have already had to admit, the man who cannot become a fairly good actor in one particular line, at least, cannot hope for any great success as a magician. Hence, the chief study of a self-conscious magician should be to assume the character of a self-possessed entertainer. Upon his ability to

play that part primarily depends his success as an artist in magic.

A tendency to panic in the event of any hitch occurring, is another detrimental characteristic. Some people are naturally cool in the face of an emergency. They may be nervous in the ordinary course of events, but an emergency steadies their nerves and braces up their energies. Others, and very often those who possess the artistic temperament in a high degree, are liable to become agitated and distracted by any slight mischance. Thus, they suffer considerable disadvantage as compared with less sensitive men. Their real merits will often be overshadowed by this failing, while men of inferior ability but who are able to keep cool may gain repute far in excess of their deserts.

This defect also is capable of correction by means of mental training, as in the case of self-consciousness. The best remedy consists in acquiring a due sense of proportion, and bearing in mind Hamlet's words--"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

At all times, a performer should remember how greatly his own attitude may influence the thoughts of his spectators. His views and impressions may not always be shared by those who witness his performance. The audience may not be disposed either to accept his abilities at his own valuation, or to agree with the opinions he expresses. But it is practically certain that the relative importance of any detail in his performance will be estimated by his own attitude toward, it. Thus, any exhibition of panic or discomfiture at once invites the contempt and derision of his audience. Whereas, if he can only control his faculties sufficiently to make light of an accidental mischance, the audience will hardly give a second thought to the circumstance.

Those who perform in public must invariably be prepared to make the best of whatever may happen, even of the very worst that can possibly happen. This can only be done by discarding everything in the nature of agitation or worry, which are the surest means for making the worst of any conceivable situation. Distractions of that kind only waste energy which should be employed to better ends, in providing a remedy for whatever may be wrong. Even though the worst may happen, and there is no possibility of finding a way out of some difficulty or other, it is not a matter of life or death, and the performer therefore need suffer no great anxiety. Even though he must tacitly confess to complete failure in one of his feats, he has no cause for serious distress. There is always another day tomorrow, in which present defeat may be turned to victory. His immediate aim should be to minimize the importance of his mishap, so far as may be possible. In outward appearance, at any rate, he should make light of it. If he can do no better, he should simply laugh at his own ill-luck and pass on to his next item. A well chosen witticism concerning the malignity of matter, the total depravity of inanimate objects, or the natural uncertainty attending the "schemes of mice and men" will usually turn the laugh in his favor. When a mishap can be passed off in this way, ridicule is disarmed at once and no unfavorable impression remains in the minds of spectators. On the other hand, when a performer displays vexation and anxiety with regard to a mishap, he merely assists in turning the laugh against himself. To laugh at the discomfiture of others is a natural tendency of

humanity at large and, in this respect, all audiences are very human indeed. If anything goes wrong--or, rather, we should say *when* anything goes wrong, the audience is almost sure to laugh. Therefore, it is for the performer to see that his spectators laugh *with* him--and not at him, as they are sure to do if he loses his head.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER XV

THE IMPORTANCE OF ARTISTIC PRINCIPLES

HAVING now covered the range we had mapped out for this section of our book, we shall end with a few remarks upon the real importance of our subject. It is to be feared that the majority of readers will largely fail to grasp the true significance of much that we have said. Not that we attach supreme value to our own contributions to general knowledge, but that portions of the subject itself will probably be regarded as of little consequence in practice. The aspect in which we have viewed the matter is by no means novel in connection with art in general. In relation to magic, however, our point of view is so unusual that many people are sure to think we have been trying to put forward ideas which are entirely novel, and at times somewhat eccentric.

We beg to assure those who have formed any such opinions that they are entirely mistaken in their conclusions. What we have said about Art in Magic has its foundation in what has long been said and accepted in connection with other arts. The views we have expressed have their analogues in the views long since adopted by exponents of other arts, and endorsed by the highest authorities upon art of every kind. Thus, we have not attempted the creation of new principles or new standards, but have merely adapted to the art of magic those principles and standards already common to art in general.

In order to bring magic into line with other arts the first step, obviously, must be to associate with it those principles and traditions whereby other arts are governed. In so doing, there is no question of bringing magic under the control of artificial and needless conventions. The accepted ideas of artistic rectitude have not been prescribed by illogical tyranny. They are conceptions evolved, in the course of ages, through the mental activity of many able men, to whom experience gave wisdom in their respective generations. If we wish to prove the claim of magic to rank upon an equality with other arts, we must first of all establish its relation to recognized artistic principles and ideals, both in theory and in practice.

In this respect, the greatest danger to be feared consists, not in the possible opposition of young magicians seeking a royal road to success, but in the antagonism of those who have already fought their way to the front rank and, by virtue of their innate sense

of artistry, have become successful exponents of magic. This latter class represents the greatest potential stumbling-block to be dreaded by those who realize the proper course to pursue. The reason is that men who, by rule of thumb, have learned something of artistic presentation are the least likely to appreciate the value of systematic knowledge. So long as they are able to stumble successfully along the paths of art, without knowing exactly where they want to go until they get there, they cannot understand why any other method should be preferable. In the light of their own practical experience, they can eventually reach a position somewhere in the vicinity of their proper destination, and with that they are content. That is what they regard as artistic procedure. It never occurs to them that, by systematizing the knowledge they possess, they could learn how to avoid the uncertainty they feel at every step they take, and how to go straight to their destination instead of having to grope their way along devious sidetracks.

As to those who have not the aid of long experience to rely upon, there can be no doubt of the value to them of definite principles whereby their proper course may be decided, thus securing freedom from many disasters which would otherwise be inevitable. Since they have to learn their business somehow, they may as well, learn it properly. It is quite as easy to learn in either way, and the proper way will save them a lot of trouble in the end. If, in addition to the how of their business (as represented by "tips," "wheezes," "sleights," and "fakes"), they will also learn the why (as revealed by a knowledge of artistic principles), they will find great advantage therein, increasing constantly with experience gained.

Hence, to those magicians who are still in the early stages of their careers, we earnestly suggest the advisability of giving due attention to the aspect in which we have presented to their view the art they profess to esteem-which they profess to regard as something higher than a mere source of profit. We do not ask them to take anything for granted. The blind acceptance of any doctrine whatever is a thing we would advise them to avoid at all times, as a most pernicious fault. We only ask them to think for themselves, and to think seriously. It was the late Professor Huxley, we believe, who said that "irrationally held truths are more harmful than reasoned errors." Anyhow, that fact and the necessity for bringing reason to bear upon ignorance and indifference are the essential points we have tried to illustrate.

To those magicians who have already achieved success and established a claim to artistic merit, we would say that what we have written is no new thing intended to supplant the knowledge they possess, or to oppose the experience they have gained. If they will only efface from their minds all prejudice and bias, they will surely find that we have simply put into definite shape and order the considerations upon which their experience has been founded, and from which their knowledge has been derived.

To all magicians alike, we would say that unless and until they study their art upon lines such as we have endeavored to indicate, any real elevation in the status of magic must be impracticable. Due recognition of the artistic claims of magic and magicians can only be brought about by proving that those who practise magic are something more than common jugglers, on the one hand, or common mechanical tinkers, on the

other hand. Illusionists, prestidigitators, and general practitioners alike, must give proof of their artistic qualifications. This they can only do by realizing that magic is essentially an intellectual pursuit, and treating it as a true art-not merely as an embodiment of more or less intelligent skill.

We do not claim to have said the last word upon this subject, nor to have set down infallible precepts throughout the entire course of our inquiry. We are well aware that innumerable details of more or less importance have been left untouched, and we have probably expressed some views, upon minor points, which may be more or less open to question. Yet, with regard to general principles, we are fairly confident of having kept within the bounds of reasonable accuracy. Our immediate aim has been to induce magicians to think, by giving them something worth thinking about. We are well aware that there exists no class of men whose work receives more earnest thought than that of the average magician. What we suggest is that, although magicians are studious and energetic men, they too often fail to think artistically. They are too liable to regard their profession as a branch of "show business," rather than a branch of true art. In this section we have tried to help them in correcting that failing, by pointing out the lines along which their ideas must run if, by virtue of their calling, they expect to rank as artists. Being public entertainers, they have open to them the path which leads to artistic repute of no mean order. If they do not choose to follow that path, they cannot expect to attain a high position in the world of art. Not only so, every magician who turns his back upon the road to artistic merit helps to degrade the status of the entire magical profession, and to create obstacles to the advancement of magic itself.

Although, in our endeavor to correct certain errors, we may have fallen here and there into errors of another kind, we feel no compunction on that score. No man is infallible, and only one man is supposed to be so. Even he could scarcely be expected to make no mistakes in dealing with questions concerning any form of art. The Pope himself could not hope to settle such questions right off the reel. If we have succeeded in providing food for discussion, and in persuading some of our fellows to think about and discuss the points we have raised, that is all we can reasonably hope to have achieved. We have simply done our best to carry out work which somebody was bound to undertake, because the necessity had become imperative. Our future responsibility in the matter will be confined to aiding whatever efforts others may make in correcting or amplifying the views we have stated. We are confident that, as time goes on, the importance of this particular aspect of magical theory will become increasingly evident, at any rate to those who give the subject their honest and unbiased attention.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

PART II THE THEORY OF MAGIC

CHAPTER I

TERMINOLOGY

TO SAY that modern magic is dominated by confusion of ideas would scarcely be an overstatement of the case. As a natural consequence, the study of magic is too often conducted upon lines that demand a maximum expenditure of energy in obtaining a minimum of resultant benefit. The student is improperly occupied in a protracted attempt to evolve order out of chaos; endeavoring to straighten out for himself a path which should already have been made straight for him. Instead of being devoted to a definite and straightforward course of study, his mind is condemned to wander aimlessly among a multitude of apparently disconnected details, which are subject to no general laws, and are devoid of everything in the nature of system or order. Indeed, the chaotic state into which the technical side of magic has been allowed to drift leaves the student in much the same plight as that of an untrained boxer who is told to "go in and win."

To many people, indeed, it may come as a surprise to learn that any such thing as a theory of magic can possibly exist. The idea that magic is necessarily an exact science, capable of systematic treatment, seems lost to view as a rule. The commonly accepted notion is that the technical side of magic consists in a heterogeneous conglomeration of odds and ends; of isolated facts and dodges which are beyond correlation. This unsatisfactory state of affairs, of course, is but an obvious consequence of the disorder in which magical science has become involved, throughout its entire constitution.

There is, as we propose to show, no reason why magic should be subjected to this exceptional disadvantage. Its technicalities are no more heterogeneous than are those of physical sciences in general. The facts and principles it embodies are no less amenable to order than are analogous details included in other subjects. In short, the technical side of magic is readily capable of being systematized and co-ordinated upon a scientific basis, and accordingly reduced to the form of a complete and harmonious system, governed by rational theory.

The false conceptions that prevail in reference to magic are, we believe, largely due to the looseness of phraseology which, among other slipshod characteristics, has been fostered by performers and public alike. In other subjects, no doubt, there often exist matters which are doomed to popular misconception. But probably magic stands preëminent among subjects which are generally misunderstood. In most subjects, however, the theory has been amply investigated, the essential facts and principles have been clearly demonstrated, and the meanings of technical terms definitely prescribed. In magic, on the contrary, such matters have received but scant attention, with the result that chance and not system has governed its development and progress. Thus, we find the subject interwoven with ill-arranged ideas which, in turn, have given rise to a vagueness of definition, making confusion worse confounded.

Take, for example, the word "trick." Apart from magic, everybody knows its meaning. But when used in connection with things magical, the word "trick" becomes not only vague as to its definition, but also a most fertile source of misunderstanding and false judgment. Worst of all, the term is so dear to magical performers that they cherish it, in all its vagueness, as something even more precious and more deeply significant than "that blessed word Mesopotamia." It is made applicable to almost anything and everything relating to magic, apart from either rhyme or reason. The result naturally produced by such folly might readily be foreseen. The public has become educated in the belief that magic consists in the doing of "tricks," and in nothing beyond that (presumably) trivial end. At the same time, as we have already noted previously, there has arisen the habit of associating magical presentations with the appliances or accessories used therein, and of regarding as practically identical all experiments in which a certain accessory or form of procedure is adopted.

Now, it cannot be too clearly understood that magic does not solely consist in the doing of tricks; nor can it be too often impressed upon the public that the object of a magical performance is not the offering of puzzles for solution. But so long as magicians insist upon miscalling their feats by the name of "tricks," so long will the public insist upon regarding magic as being primarily intended to invite speculation upon "how it is done." Professor Hoffmann, the dean of magical writers, has expressed himself in no uncertain tone concerning the persistent misuse of this unfortunate word "trick." To him, the description of a magical feat or experiment as a "trick" is utterly abhorrent. He objects, as we do, to that misuse of the word. He prefers, as we do, the word "experiment." Clearly, in any magical presentation, the "trick" must be the means whereby a certain end is attained or promoted. It is the *cause* which produces a certain result, and cannot possibly be both means and end together. Therefore, to describe a magical experiment, feat, or presentation as a "trick," is a "terminological inexactitude" of the first order. It is an offense against good sense and artistic propriety, deserving the fullest condemnation. We ourselves are at times compelled to use the word in this illegitimate sense, because it has been incorporated in the titles of certain well known experiments. We do so, however, with extreme reluctance, and only under protest.

It is obvious that, before one can attempt a rational statement of any kind, all parties concerned must definitely understand the meaning attached to the terms in which that statement is to be made. Otherwise, it is impossible to convey accurate information.

Hence, at the outset, our treatment of magical theory must embody a few remarks, by way of clearing up some of the misconceptions and slipshod vagaries associated with the terms employed. There is no need to deal categorically with the errors prevalent in this connection; nor, indeed, to do so much as enumerate them. It will be sufficient for us to set down the meanings which ought to be attached to the terms we use, and which are accordingly intended to be understood herein.

The first and most important definition, of course, is that of the term "magic" itself. In ancient times, the word implied the setting aside of natural laws, in some manner or other. But since the ancients had a very limited knowledge of the laws of nature-or, practically, no accurate knowledge whatever, concerning the forces by which the laws of nature are made manifest--"magic" was once a term used to denote the cause of any event or achievement beyond the explanation of popular intelligence. In much the same way, modern investigators of so-called "psychical" phenomena describe as supernormal any event for the occurrence of which physical science is not yet able to account. Nevertheless, we who live in the twentieth century are, or should be, aware that the laws of nature cannot possibly be contravened. They may be set in mutual opposition, but they cannot otherwise be overcome or defied. The forces of nature, humanly speaking, are incapable of either destruction or suspension. Therefore, at the present day the term "magic" must have a meaning very different from that assigned to it in bygone centuries. The only meaning it can now possess must relate to the *apparent*, not *actual* defiance of natural laws.

Modern magic, therefore, deals exclusively with the creation of mental impressions. We cannot perform real miracles, as everybody is well aware. We can only perform feats which look like miracles, because the means whereby they are performed have been skilfully screened from observation. Therefore, in order to define the nature of modern magic, we must find some formula that will represent the common foundation of all the apparently miraculous effects we produce. Since those effects are not really, but only apparently, due to miraculous processes, there is no difficulty in arriving at a satisfactory definition of the meaning now applicable to the word "magic." Here it is:-

Magic consists in creating, by misdirection of the senses, the mental impression of supernatural agency at work.

That, and that only, is what modern magic really is, and that meaning alone is now assignable to the term.

The modern magician does not deceive his spectators-that is to say, the legitimate magician. The modern charlatan, of course, has no more conscience than his predecessors. He will deceive anybody who will give him the chance, and he will try to deceive even those who don't; just to make sure of missing no possible opening for chicanery. He and the legitimate magician, however, are as far apart as the poles, in aim and procedure. A legitimate magician never deludes his audiences as to the character of his performance. He makes no claim to the possession of powers beyond the scope of

physical science. Neither does he, while rejecting the *suggestio falsi*, substitute in its place the *suppressio veri*. That method is one frequently adopted by charlatans in magic. The latter gentry often refrain from committing themselves to any definite statement on the subject of their powers. In effect, they say to their spectators, "We leave you to decide upon the nature of our feats. If you can explain the methods we employ, you will know that what we do is not miraculous. If, on the other hand, you cannot explain our methods you will, of course, know that we have the power to work miracles."

Since the majority of people attending public performances cannot explain the simplest devices used in magic, it is scarcely likely that persons of such limited capability will arrive at any satisfactory explanation of processes involving even a moderate degree of complexity. Consequently, the mere reticence of the charlatan suffices to convince many people that "there is something in it." So there is, no doubt; but, usually, not much—certainly, nothing such as the innocent dupe conceives.

The distinguishing characteristic of a legitimate magician is his straightforwardness. He makes no false pretenses, either by suggestion, implication, or reticence. This present treatise of course, relates only to legitimate magic; and, therefore, our definition of the term is limited to misdirection of the senses, exclusively. We have nothing to do with fraudulent or semi-fraudulent deceptions of intelligence, as practised by unscrupulous adventurers.

The misdirections of sense which constitute magic as a whole, may be divided into three groups, according to the nature of the processes upon which they are respectively based. Thus, magical processes are, in character, either Manipulative, Mental, or Physical. These groups represent the three technical orders of magic.

Each of these orders may be subdivided into various Classes or Types, according to the general nature of the principles they include.

Each Class or Type may, again, be subdivided into minor groups, according to the particular Principles or Methods respectively involved.

Each of these latter groups may be further subdivided into specific categories, in accordance with the particular tricks or devices in which the various principles or methods are

utilized.

Lastly, we have the subdivision of classes into specific groups, determined by the nature of the results attained.

It would of course be possible to classify magical processes still further, in accordance with the objects used in connection with them, and other details of staging and procedure, but no useful purpose could be served by so doing. From the foregoing dissection of magic, we arrive at a number of definitions, as follows:

A magical *Process* is essentially a means for misdirection of the spectator's senses. It belongs to one of the three Orders of magic: Manipulative, Mental, or Physical.

The *Type* of a magical process implies the general character of the principles it embodies.

A magical *Principle* or *Method* is a basis upon which a number of tricks or devices may be founded.

A magical *Trick* or *Device* is an invention, by means of which a certain principle is utilized for the production of a given result.

A magical *Effect* is the final result, due to the use of a certain trick or tricks in combination.

A *Feat* of magic consists in the successful performance of a magical experiment--the accomplishment of a magician's intended purpose.

A magical *Experiment* consists in attempting the production of a magical effect--or, in other words, the attempted accomplishment of a feat of magic.

In accordance with these definitions any magical experiment may be traced to its origin or, at any rate, be assigned to its proper place in the general scheme. It must not, however, be imagined that a magical experiment is necessarily confined within the limits of one group, class, or order. On the contrary, it may embody a number of individual tricks or devices, each of which is referable to its own particular line of origin. This point will become increasingly evident as we proceed. Incidentally, it will serve to demonstrate the utter absurdity of describing a magical experiment as a "trick." Such experiments not only may, but usually do, include quite a number of tricks, entirely diverse in character. The

combination of those tricks for the purpose of producing a certain effect constitutes an invention, which could be protected by law. The production of that particular result, by means of that combination of tricks, constitutes a magical feat. The presentation of that feat, with a view to producing an intended effect, constitutes a magical experiment. It is, beyond question, an experiment; because its success must depend upon the performer's ability, coupled with a fortuitous absence of adverse circumstances.

With this preamble, we may now proceed to the systematic dissection of magical theory, upon common-sense lines. We hope to show, presently, the foundations upon which modern magic is based, the manner in which the entire superstructure of magical achievement has been raised, the possibilities awaiting development at the hands of magicians, and also the directions in which future developments may most readily be brought about. We do not aim at the description of any and every magical feat ever performed. The existing literature of magic amply provides for the needs of those who seek to know "how it is done." Rather, we wish to aid originality by giving original explanations and suggesting original ideas.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER II

GENERAL ANALYSIS

WE HAVE already pointed out that magical technics may be dealt with under three principal headings, according to the nature of the processes involved. Thus, we have the three Orders of Magic-Manipulative, Mental and Physical.

Manipulative Magic is that which depends upon what is called "sleight-of-hand." In other words, it is a form of jugglery.

Mental Magic is the branch comprising, mainly, the various secret processes which a performer "works out in his head," during his performance.

Physical Magic, by far the most extensive and most important branch, includes those processes which depend upon the use of mechanical appliances, or other adaptations of the physical sciences in general.

These three groups, as we have previously stated, are fixed and determinate only so far as concerns the typical processes used in magic. They must not be regarded as a classification of magical experiments. In fact, very few of such experiments are dependent upon one order of magic alone; while, in many cases, they involve a combination of all three orders. These subdivisions of the subject relate to the general character of magical *processes*, rather than to the feats or presentations in which those processes are employed. The due distinction between experiments and their associated processes is of considerable importance in magical theory.

Passing on to the subdivision of respective orders according to class or type of process, we find that Manipulative Magic has four departments. These may be set down under the headings of Prearrangement, Concealment, Interposition, and False Handling.

Mental Magic is not so readily divisible in accordance with the actual type of processes employed, since the matter is so largely complicated by extraneous assistance of various kinds. Still, for practical purposes, there are three subdivisions which will be found satisfactory. These are Thought Transference, Memorization, and Divination.

Physical Magic can be appropriately subdivided, according to the departments of science or invention to which its component types respectively may be assigned. Thus, there are six classes in this branch of magic, viz., the Mechanical, Optical, Acoustic, Electrical,

Chemical, and Molecular.

The foregoing classes or types may, again, be subdivided into groups according to the various principles or methods involved, as follows:

MANIPULATIVE MAGIC

CLASS OR TYPE	PRINCIPLE OR METHOD
Prearrangement.....	{ Collusion Disposition Preparation
Concealment.....	{ Covering Disposal Retaining
Interposition.....	{ Loading Duplication Substitution
False Handling.....	{ Forcing Securing Transposition

MENTAL MAGIC

CLASS OR TYPE	PRINCIPLE OR METHOD
Thought Transference.....	{ Code Work Secret Speech Secret Conveyance of Documents Duplicate Reading
Memorization.....	{ Artificial Memory Counting Down
Divination.....	{ Clairvoyance Discovery Prediction

PHYSICAL MAGIC

CLASS OR TYPE	PRINCIPLE OR METHOD
---------------	---------------------

Mechanical.....	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outer Casing Concealed Access Secret Cavity or Receptacle Diverse Formation Double Facing Concealed Mechanism or Motive Power Concealed Connection Invisible Suspension
Optical.....	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mirror Masking Reflected Images Transparent Reflectors Lantern Projection Background Work Chiaroscuro
Acoustic.....	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Misdirection by Sound Conveyance of Sound Disguise by Sound
Electrical.....	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conveyance of Motive Power through Supports Trigger Action by Current Ignition Electrotelegraphy and Telephony
Chemical.....	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apparent Transformation of Substance Ignition Change of Color by Chemical Reaction Invisible Writing
Molecular.....	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Change of State, from solid to liquid, from either to gaseous, or vice versa Change of Color, Properties, or Dimensions by variation in temperature, pressure, etc.

Beyond this point we do not propose to carry the classification of magical technics. The two remaining subdivisions, although undoubtedly essential to the theory of magic, can only be dealt with in a general sense. The items are in fact too numerous for tabulation and fortunately there is no need for attempting the work. The foregoing analysis will suffice for all purposes in which detailed classification is really necessary.

In this connection, there is one matter that well deserves attention. We have made an exhaustive analysis of the principal components embraced in the subject of magic. We have set down a list of the general principles, methods, and types of process comprised in

the technical side of magic. Yet in this catalog of essential constituents, forming the very basis of magic, there is not included one single trick. We commend this reflection to those who believe magic to consist wholly in "tricks."

It is not until we have classified the principles and methods employed in magic, that we come to the particular tricks or devices in which those technical principles and methods are embodied. Thus a "trick" is but a very small thing, in comparison with other essentials in magic. It is but a particular detail in the general scheme-an important detail, no doubt, but not of supreme importance. More often than not, it could be replaced by an entirely different device, which would answer the same purpose equally well.

This fact becomes evident when we pass on to the final subdivision, according to the results attained by means of magical tricks-the final subdivision, it must be remembered, from a technical standpoint. On artistic and other grounds, it would be possible to continue the subdivision of magic indefinitely. Technically, however, the immediate result produced by the employment of a certain trick represents the ultimate basis for classification.

By way of practical illustration, we shall suppose that some member of a magician's audience has chosen a card from a pack handed to him. The performer takes the pack, and begs the spectator to replace his chosen card therein. The card, accordingly, is replaced. In the act of turning toward the stage, the performer makes the "pass," and brings the chosen card to the top of the pack ready to be produced in any manner preferred. Now let us analyze this procedure, which is common enough, in all conscience.

To begin with, we have a certain *result*--the finding of a chosen card. In producing this result, a certain *trick* was employed--the "pass." That trick embodies a certain *principle* or *method*--transposition. The principle in question belongs to a certain *class* or *type* of process--false handling. And, finally, the type of process described as "false handling" belongs to the *order* of manipulative magic.

In like manner, every magical operation may be subjected to technical analysis, and thereby a clear understanding may be gained of its true nature and position in the general theory of magic. Of course, not every result attainable by magical processes is so simple as the foregoing in its genesis. Some results are due to a combination of processes, each of which has its own separate origin. But, however simple or however complex may be the operations concerned in producing a given result, their source or sources can be traced quite readily. It is in such systematic forms of investigation that the science of magic has its foundation. And it is by such means alone that accurate conceptions are to be obtained, and rational progress facilitated, in consequence.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic

by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER III

MISDIRECTION

THAT time-worn fallacy, "the quickness of the hand deceives the eye," might well form the text for the present chapter. As an example of how not to do it, the catch-phrase in question cannot easily be surpassed. Its falsity is so glaring, the principle it embodies is so impossible-and for obvious reasons-that one can only marvel at the audacity which first offered such a flagrant howler for public acceptance. Yet in spite of its palpable absurdity, that ancient legend has not only been accepted as gospel by the public, but has also received professional endorsement, times out of number. This is misdirection, with a vengeance; but it is not the kind of misdirection which, as we have said, constitutes the fundamental basis of magic.

No! The form of misdirection represented by the phrase we have quoted can only be described as lying, pure and simple. The quickness of even a highly skilled hand cannot deceive an attentive eye, however untrained the latter may be. In fact, of all possible movements, one that is rapid is most likely to attract attention. Still, the world undoubtedly believes that a magician's success largely depends upon the quickness of his movement. And it may be whispered, one occasionally meets with professional magicians who entertain much the same belief. This fact is typical of the confusion associated with matters magical, in every department.

The misdirection which forms the groundwork of magic does not consist in telling lies, with the object of deceiving the spectator's *intelligence*. It consists admittedly in misleading the spectator's senses, in order to screen from detection certain details for which secrecy is required. It militates against the spectator's faculties of observation, not against his understanding. Broadly, it may be said to comprise three general methods, viz.-Distraction, Disguise, and Simulation. Every means employed by magicians for misdirecting the senses of an audience, will be found allied to one or other of those elementary principles.

The principle of distraction is, perhaps, that most commonly utilized. It operates by direct appeal to the spectator's observation, whereby the latter is drawn away from whatever the performer wishes to conceal. It is a "red herring drawn across the scent," so to speak; and the introduction of such red herrings is often an important item in the procedure connected with a magical experiment. The more direct the challenge, the

more certain is observation to be drawn toward the quarter in which the distraction arises. The more haphazard the distraction appears to be, the less likely it is to arouse suspicion as to its true purpose. A carefully prearranged "accident" is the most perfect form of misdirection--for one occasion only. It will not work efficiently twice, with the same spectators.

For point-blank distraction, we can recall no better example than that provided by a foreign performer, who appeared in London some years ago. Speaking no English, he employed an interpreter, who spoke some English--though not anything excessive. Holding up, say, a borrowed ring, the performer would remark "*Voici la bague!*" the interpreter immediately following on with "And here is a piece of paper!" The latter sentence, being uttered in a very loud voice, created a distraction which took away all observation from the performer, giving him an opportunity to submit the ring to a process of transposition. When the eyes of the audience had returned to the performer, the original *bague* was represented by deputy.

It is, however, very seldom that distraction of so direct a nature as this can be employed. More often than not, the distraction is derived mainly from some action on the part of the magician himself. Hence, we learn the importance of the maxim that, when a magician has anything "magical" to do, he should never look at what he is doing. For, above all other actions, a movement of the performer's eyes is the most certain to be followed by an audience--a very fortunate thing for the magician, too, so long as he bears the fact in mind. If, owing to nervousness or uncertainty, he permits his eyes to glance at what he does not want the audience to see, hundreds of eyes will take the same direction at once.

A magical performer should practise the art of "looking out of the corner of his eye." It is not a difficult art to acquire; and, at times, may be found extremely handy. The schoolmaster, with head bent down and eyes intently fixed upon the answer he is correcting, has no difficulty in detecting Smith, junior, who is playing the goat behind the end form. In like manner, a magician should be able to see almost everything he can need to see, without actually looking at it. No doubt some eyes are better adapted than others for this purpose, while in most eyes there is one particular direction in which this sidelong vision is easiest to manage. But, in any case, it is worth a magician's while to see what can be done by practice. There need be no time wasted over it, as the method can be practised anywhere and at any odd moment.

A familiar example of misdirection by gaze is that of looking at the wrong hand, during manipulative feats. The billiard ball, let us say, has been passed (apparently) from the right hand to the left. Both hands have their backs to the audience, the left fingers being closed as though grasping the ball, and the right fingers outspread as though the ball were not still in that hand. Meanwhile, the performer stares hard at his left hand until such time as the supposed ball has been dribbled away to nothingness. It would be interesting to know if any spectator is ever misled by this particular maneuver. Not very often, one would imagine. Anyhow, it illustrates our point very forcibly. No matter how unskilful a performer may be, when presenting this little feat of manipulation he feels instinctively the urgent need for keeping his eyes fixed upon the hand which does not

contain the ball. It is not until his right hand drops to the bend of his right knee, or rises to the tip of his left elbow, that he feels safe in looking where the ball really is.

When, in addition to looking in a certain direction, the performer points toward and calls attention to a particular object, the distraction thus created is very potent indeed. However seasoned to magic a spectator may be, the threefold challenge thus issued to his observation is practically certain to attain its end. It would be strange indeed if he failed to glance at least in the direction indicated.

In the main, distraction may be said to consist in the interpolation of non-essentials; *i.e.*, matters which occupy the attention of the audience, to the exclusion of essential details in procedure or construction. Sometimes the distraction may consist in simple incidentals, such as the entrance of an assistant at a critical moment. Sometimes it may consist in the introduction of suspicious-looking actions or accessories, which have nothing to do with what is going on. But at all times, a magician should remember that the least efficient form of misdirection is anything which depends upon insisting upon the obvious. To call attention to something that all may see for themselves may distract the attention of a few-or perhaps not. At the best, it is a risky procedure, and one to be avoided. To be efficient, a distraction must present some element of surprise, interest, or novelty, either in itself or in reference to what has gone before.

Misdirection by disguise consists in a skilful blending of suspicious and innocent details in such manner that the former are overlooked. In other words it depends upon making "fakey" things look as though they were free from sophistication. The real inwardness of this principle is far too often unrecognized by magicians, though an audience will never lose sight of it.

Some magicians, indeed, seem to act upon a principle entirely opposite to the foregoing. Instead of doing all they can do to disguise the "fakey" nature of their accessories and movements, they seem to think that everything they use, and everything they do, should be made to look as "fakey" as possible. All their appliances are obviously "conjuring apparatus"; all their movements are designed to convey the impression of manipulative skill. Every object exhibited upon their stages is fashioned and decorated like nothing else under the sun. It is done "for effect." They cannot take up any object without proceeding to juggle with it-even the very objects they are about to use for magical purposes. If the next experiment is to be with billiard balls, they begin by showing how easy it is to make a billiard ball seem to be where it is not. If they are about to use cards, they preface the experiment with feats of dexterity which will impress upon their audience the idea that the false handling of a pack is, if anything, easier than rolling off a log. These jugglings are also introduced "for effect."

But what is the true effect created by such unnecessary padding? Simply to make an audience feel that, whatever happens, there can be no cause for surprise or wonderment. Having seen how readily the performer can handle his accessories for the production of extraordinary results, spectators are bound to regard the subsequent presentation as a natural consequence. Their further interest can be only of an academic order because, after witnessing the performer's manipulative fireworks, everything else he may do

seems to follow as a matter of course.

In like manner, the use of obvious "apparatus" is bound to detract from the success of a magical performance. When appliances are so designed as to show that they are mere covers for mechanical trickery, a spectator's only possible source of interest is in wondering how the machinery is constructed. Granting the existence of mechanism, it only needs the skill of an inventor to produce the results obtained. There can be no impression of magical occurrences when, in the appliances a magician uses, there is clear evidence of sophistication. In fact, a magical effect can be created only when there is no apparent existence of trickery, either manipulative or otherwise. It is bad business for a magician either to display skill in jugglery or to use accessories which arouse suspicion as to their internal structure. Such things are utterly antagonistic to the principle of misdirection by disguise.

The simplest embodiment, perhaps, of this principle is the familiar "41 covering" of one action by another. When, for instance, a performer has to make the "pass" with a pack of cards, it is absolutely essential that the necessary movements of the fingers be covered by an apparently natural and unsuspecting action. He cannot face his spectators and deliberately make the pass, unscreened, before their eyes. At least, he cannot do so and hope to create an impression of magical results. He is therefore bound to do something that will disguise the real nature of his actions, and prevent the trick from being disclosed.

It is absurd for a magical performer to imagine that, because he has acquired a certain deftness of manipulation, a facility in juggling with the accessories he uses, he must necessarily be an expert in magic. Such is far from being the fact. In gaining that kind of skill, he has travelled only half the journey he must take before reaching his goal-by far the easier half, too. The technical perfection of his sleights has but little value in itself. To be made valuable it requires the aid of ingenious and effective disguise. Without the latter, it can only serve to make the spectators think the performer is clever with his hands, and to prevent that idea from being lost to sight. It thus emphasizes the very point which a capable magician wishes, above all, to keep in the background. When, however, by continued study and practice the performer has added to his mechanical skill the refinements of disguise, clean and artistic, then only is he in a position to claim the title of magical expert. And then, also, he will find that claim disputed by none capable of forming just conclusions on such points.

In the same way, it is not enough that a magical performer shall provide himself with trick-appliances which will bear more or less examination without the precise nature of their tricks becoming evident. It is not enough to have the sophistications hidden by blobs, thicknesses or deformities of "decoration," so that spectators cannot see what is underneath. On the contrary, magical appliances should be so constructed that their inner devices are not concealed by a mere covering of some sort, but are disguised by blending with the general structure. In fact, so far from suggesting the possibility of there being anything discoverable, a magician's accessories should rather look like objects of normal construction, which nobody would associate with trickery.

This is particularly the case where an appliance is intended to resemble some article in general use, or the shape of which is familiar. For example, can there be anything more palpably absurd or more utterly unconvincing than the "feather-flowers" one so often sees produced by magical performers? They are like nothing else under the heavens, and are as innocent of any suggestion of magic as a child's rattle. There is no misdirection associated with the use of things like these. There can be none. They are obviously made of feathers; they obviously close up into very small compass; and no amount of ingenuity could ever make an audience even regard their production as clever. As to throwing an audience off the scent in reference to the *modus operandi* of such a production, that is clearly impossible.

On the other hand, as an example of efficient disguise, let us take de Kolta's little dodge of concealing a small silk handkerchief within a half-opened match-box. No device could be simpler than this; nor, in its way, could anything be more perfect. A common match-box stands half-opened upon the table. With his sleeves rolled up, and his hands undoubtedly empty, the performer takes up the matches, strikes one, lights a candle, blows out the match and closes the box, replacing it on the table. It must be admitted that the act of conveying a handkerchief into one's previously empty hand could scarcely be disguised in a more unsuspecting manner. Unfortunately, the trick of thus concealing a small object soon became known, and consequently has now but little value. That, however, does not detract from the merit of the original device.

In connection with disguise, which is in reality nothing more than a special form of concealment, the question of display becomes of importance, by contrast. While the magician must use all his art to disguise and cover up what he does not require to be seen, he is equally bound to make sure that every moment and every detail that ought to be seen shall be seen. If, after having effectually secured himself in the matter of disguise, he so bungles his procedure and stage arrangements as to prevent people from seeing, half the time, what is going on, his good work will be wasted.

Simulation is a form of pretense. In disguise, we have the principle of making one thing look like another and entirely different thing. In the misdirection of sense by means of simulation, we have the principle of giving apparent existence to things that do not exist, or presence to things that are absent.

The billard ball feat, already cited in this chapter, serves to illustrate the three basic principles of misdirection in magic. In the gaze of the performer, and the pointing of the fingers of his right hand, we have the principle of distraction. In the extended position of his right hand, intended to convey the idea that the ball is not held therein, we have the principle of disguise. Lastly, in the partially closed fingers of the left hand, we have the principle of simulation. There appears to be something where, in reality, there is nothing.

In mechanical devices also, simulation often plays a most important part. Usually it is employed for the purpose of retaining the form of something or somebody already removed. Examples of this method, from "The Vanishing Lady" to the coin dropped into a tumbler of water, will occur readily to all who know anything of magic. The

converse method—that of simulating the form of a person or object not yet present—though not so much used as the former, is sufficiently familiar to need no special illustration.

Upon this form of misdirection, little need be said. Its employment, both in manipulation and construction, must be governed by the circumstances of each particular case. The one important point in every instance alike, is to make sure that the working shall be "clean." On one hand, the simulation in itself must be efficient; and, on the other hand, all evidence that the person or thing simulated has either gone or not yet arrived must be entirely lacking. It is of no use to cover a bird-cage with a handkerchief containing a "fake" and expect the audience to believe that the cage is still there, if one effects the removal clumsily, or allows the fabric to blow under, as it could not were the cage not removed. If the simulation is not good, spectators cannot be expected to believe that the object simulated is where it is supposed to be. Nor can they be expected to believe, no matter how perfect the simulation, that an object still remains or has previously been in a certain place, if the getting-away or getting-in of that object is more or less in evidence. Cleanness, both in actual simulation and the procedure connected with it, is the one great essential.

Misdirection, in either of its branches, is not confined to one particular sense. Sight, of course, is the sense most frequently concerned; but other senses also come in for their share of attention. Hearing, for instance, is misdirected when, in "The Aerial Treasury," coins appear to fall into the hat from the performer's right hand, when they really fall from his left. Touch is misdirected when a spectator thinks he drops a coin into a tumbler of water, though he drops in reality a disc of glass. Taste is misdirected when spectators believe themselves to be drinking innumerable choice beverages when, in reality, their drinks are merely compounds of a few special ingredients contained in a "Magic Kettle." In short, every sense is open to misdirection, and thus may be made to serve the ends of a skilful magician.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER IV

STYLES OF MAGIC

IN MAGIC, as in every other calling, the modern tendency is toward specialization. And, as may readily be imagined, each specialist is apt to regard his own particular branch as the most important, and to adopt a high-sounding title by virtue of his hypothetical supremacy. In any profession this latter tendency is objectionable, for obvious reasons. But in magic it has also the disadvantage of being utterly ridiculous. The technics of magic, as we have shown, are readily capable of classification according to the processes employed, but are quite incapable of reduction to any sort of system according to respective styles of practice. Since almost every magical experiment includes processes of various types and orders, it is impossible to classify performers according to their respective lines of work.

Yet, for instance, there are performers who pride themselves upon being exponents of pure sleight-of-hand, and nothing else. There are others who boast of being stage illusionists, pure and simple. And so on, *ad nauseam*. What, after all, do such claims amount to? Nothing whatever! There is no such thing as a pure sleight-of-hand performer. Or, if there is, may the gods have pity on him. There is no such thing as a stage illusionist, pure and simple. Stage illusions which can be presented without the aid of some considerable amount of manipulative ability represent a class of inventions yet to be produced.. And so on and so forth, throughout the whole range of magic. It is necessary that every performer shall specialize, more or less, but there is no such thing as a true specialist in any given style of magic.

By way of example, consider what can be done with pure sleight-of-hand. It is true, there are some classical experiments, such as "The Cups and Balls" and "The Aerial Treasury," in which sleight-of-hand alone is employed. But when one has exhausted the very limited resources represented by such experiments, "pure sleight-of-hand" ceases to exist. In order to show his audiences anything worth showing, the performer has to use contraptions which at once place his feats outside the limitations of pure sleight-of-hand. He becomes an "apparatus conjurer," a "stage illusionist"--or what you will. Whatever he may think to the contrary, he is no more a pure sleight-of-hand man than is the boy who has bought a half-guinea box of tricks.

Similarly, the performer who prides himself upon being an "illusionist," and professes

to look down upon the man who "does sleight-of-hand" is entirely at fault. His performances involve as much sleight-of-hand as do those of the man he pretends to despise. He is no more an "illusionist" than is his confrere, who scorns the title. He is as much a sleight-of-hand man as the other, who regards sleight-of-hand as the acme of magic. Such considerations, if only on account of their extreme novelty, may appear somewhat difficult to entertain. Nevertheless, in view of their undoubted truth, they have to be faced, and dealt with in the light of common sense.

The final conclusion which facts compel one to adopt is that, on the whole, the most important order of magic is the physical. It is only by keeping abreast with the progress of physical science that magic can retain its hold upon the public. In ancient times, magic and progress were one. Today, the progress of physical science constantly tends to outrival the marvels of magic. Such being the case, it is hopeless for a magician to rely upon mere jugglery to maintain his art in the position it should hold in public regard. The day has gone by, and rightly so, when "hanky-panky" and "hocus-pocus" were powerful fetishes. To obtain and retain worthy estimation, the modern magician needs to be something of a scientist, and a thorough artist into the bargain. He should bring to bear upon his work every resource of modern progress that can be made available.

Antagonism between various styles of magic is an idea that ought to be inconceivable. In every essential point of art and theory, all styles of magic are as one. When we come to the bedrock of the matter, we find there are only two definite styles in existence; and even these have no precise line of demarcation between them. They are, respectively, Parlor Magic and Stage Illusion. The consideration which mainly determines the category to which an experiment belongs is a particular suitability for presentation before either large or small audiences, as the case may be. But, as we all know, many experiments are suitable for audiences of any magnitude; and will prove effective upon a big stage, in no less degree than among a few guests at a private house. So even this broad basis of classifying magic according to style of work gives way, if too hard pressed.

A performer, of course, may specialize in experiments with cards, coins, balls, mirrors, cabinets, glassware, threads, electricity, second sight, acoustics, peg-tops, tiddlywinks, or anything else that may suit him. But in specializations of that kind, there is nothing so vitally characteristic that any one of them can be said to represent a special branch of magic. In theory and in art alike, such differentiations are too slender to sustain any real class distinction. Still less are they capable of conferring upon their exponents any special claim to eminence in the art or practice of magic. Minor details concerning the methods or accessories a performer employs, and to which his procedure is confined, are too insignificant to create a definite style, to be set apart from the general practice and constitution of magic as a whole.

The question of discriminating between the two legitimate styles of magic is one of great importance to every performer, without exception. Obviously, the choice of experiments must be governed by the conditions in which they have to be performed. Experiments that prove effective in a drawing-room are usually quite the reverse

when presented upon the stage. On the other hand, those which create the greatest impression when exhibited upon the stage are usually either unsuitable for a drawing-room, or impossible to present in such cramped quarters. Size, of course, is the chief factor, though by no means the only one, in deciding whether an experiment is better suited to stage work or private performances. If the appliances and accessories requisite for an experiment are very large, they cannot readily be displayed in an ordinary room. If very small, they cannot be seen properly upon a large stage. In either case, there can be no good effect produced, owing to inappropriate conditions. Thus, the drawing-room magician, as a rule, confines his work to such objects as may be held in the hand, while the stage illusionist relies upon effects in which large objects are employed.

This question of size, however, as we have said, is not the sole consideration involved in the selection of experiments adapted to the exigencies of a particular case. "The Aerial Treasury," for instance, is an excellent item for inclusion in a private performance. Nevertheless, we must not therefore conclude that it will not be effective on the stage. As a matter of fact, we all know that when properly performed it is most effective as a stage illusion. Conversely, there are many experiments, notably those with playing-cards, which are capable of being made very effective upon the stage, and yet are not on that account unsuited for private performance. On the contrary, experiments with playing-cards, in particular, can be shown in private with enhanced effect as compared with that produced on the stage. This is not because, as a rule, the audience in private can see the cards better than they can be seen by an audience in public. The latter can generally see such distinct objects quite well enough. No, it is because the average man believes there is some special virtue in being close to a magical performer while he is at work. One hears it said, again and again, "I stood within a yard of him all the time, and yet-." The rest can be filled in by the reader, from memory.

Of course, anyone who knows anything of magic is aware that, more often than not, the spectator who stands at a performer's elbow, or faces him at the opposite side of a table, is far less likely to detect trickery than is the man who views him from the seat of a theater. It stands to reason that the man who has a performer in view from head to foot, is far more dangerous than one who is too close for making a comprehensive inspection. Matters of this kind, however, are only of importance in so far as they serve to impress upon magicians the fact that, when giving public performances, care in the exercise of misdirection is of far greater importance than is the case with performances given in private. Whatever belief to the contrary may be held by a large majority of persons, a magician ought never to forget that, on the stage, he is at a disadvantage in comparison with his favorable situation in private performances, as a rule; that is to say, of course, so long as he uses rational judgment in the choice of experiments for drawing-room work. Naturally, if he should be so ill-advised as to attempt feats which can be properly accomplished only in stage conditions, he would necessarily be handicapped in a dwelling-house of average size. Our comparison has reference only to such experiments as are effective either in public or in private.

Briefly, then, in deciding the style of effects suitable for a certain occasion, every

magician must be a law unto himself. There is no other law to guide him, beyond the very indefinite and often debatable rule that, for private work, small effects are usually preferable; and for stage work, large effects which involve the use of objects which can be seen easily at a distance. So much also depends upon the performer himself, upon his ability to turn certain situations to his own advantage, and upon the limitations which particular conditions impose upon his skill, that nobody but himself can decide this question. There are two styles of magic—large work and small. But there are also many experiments of an intermediate character; so many, in fact, that we have a regular gradation from the smallest effects to the largest. Therefore, in point of magnitude, it is quite impossible to draw a precise boundary line between parlor magic and stage illusion. The distinction is not exact, but unquestionably is only approximate.

Apart from prejudice, one is bound to conclude that a performer's claim to exclusive specialization in any particular branch of magic must, to say the least, be very difficult to sustain. The sleight-of-hand man has to employ mechanical and other devices, which bring his work within the scope of physical magic. The stage performer or illusionist is equally dependent upon manual dexterity; for the simple reason that a mechanical experiment usually requires "working" no less than one that is purely manipulative. One may have all the requisite apparatus but, without the skill wanted for its proper handling, that apparatus can only be so much useless lumber. As for the specialist in mental magic, his work includes so many devices belonging to the manipulative and physical branches that his position in the art is, perhaps, the most difficult to define with accuracy.

So much for the problematic classification of magicians according to style of work. We may now pass on to the surer ground of distinction based on the characteristic features of magical processes. In our next chapter we shall deal with the principles and methods which constitute the various types of process comprised in magic. The types themselves, being merely convenient groupings of more or less similar principles, need no special comment. Their respective characteristics are sufficiently illustrated by the general nature of their components.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic

by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER V

MANIPULATIVE PRINCIPLES

BEGINNING with manipulative magic, it will be seen by referring to [the previous table](#) that this branch of the subject includes four types, the first on the list being Prearrangement. This, again, has three subdivisions with certain characteristics in common. They all relate to matters which the performer has to set in order before his experiment begins. We shall consider them in the order given.

The principle of Collusion is one in which little merit exists. An effect depending upon this principle is simply a put-up job, by means of which the audience is actually deceived, instead of being dealt with legitimately. Nothing can be simpler than to employ an agent, who pretends to be an ordinary spectator and plays into the performer's hands in some preconcerted manner. This can hardly be regarded as a genuinely magical principle, though there may arise occasions when its use may be justified. As a rule, it is to be avoided as a form of procedure unworthy of a magician whose repute is of any value to him.

Disposition, the principle next on the list, represents the prearrangement of accessories in a certain place or order, as required for the experiments about to be performed. Examples of this principle are provided by the stocking of cards, the loading of pockets or other receptacles, and the manifold details incidental to putting things where they will be wanted during a performance.

Preparation relates to processes employed in tampering beforehand, in some unobtrusive manner, with accessories to be used later on. All devices by means of which articles are "doctored up" for some special purpose that has to be served later on, come under this heading. Marked cards give a familiar illustration of the principle. A more familiar, though less direct, illustration is found in the constant insistence by magicians upon the fact that their accessories are *without* preparation. We may remark, in passing, that this custom is more honored in the breach than in the observance. A direct repudiation, such as this, only serves to arouse suspicion about things in general, even though the article in question is proved entirely innocent. Better far, in most cases, is the indirect proof of honesty which allays suspicion instead of tending to create it. In certain instances, when an experiment depends for its success upon a strict examination of accessories, the disclaimer is bound to be made, in some form or other. But even then

it is well to avoid direct reference to preparation or any other form of trickery. To assure the audience that a receptacle has no trap or false bottom, is about the surest way to make people think there may be something of the kind; whereas, had nothing been said about the matter, they might never have given it a thought. If the thing to be examined can be given into the hands of a spectator and, upon some pretext, he is caused to handle and inspect it in a manner that indirectly suggests the absence of trickery, that is bound to be more satisfactory than the common plan of bluntly inviting the man to satisfy himself that there is no trick in the thing. When, for instance, it is necessary to show that a pack of cards is free from preparation, rather than to ask a spectator to see that such is the case the performer would be wiser were he to request that some stranger oblige him by counting and shuffling the cards. Left at that, every useful purpose is served and no harm done.

Under the general heading of Concealment, the first principle on the list is Covering. It includes all processes in which one action or object serves to screen another from view. Thus, any device for passing one object behind another, or performing an action that is required not to be seen, under the cover of a different movement altogether, is included in this type. Thus, dropping the hands while making the pass, or holding two cards together so as to appear but one only, may be cited in illustration of this principle.

Disposal, the principle next in order, refers to processes by means of which objects are finally put out of sight during the course of an experiment. Dropping an article into the *profonde*, or other convenient receptacle, is a process of this type. Other examples will readily occur to the reader's memory.

Retaining, the last of this particular group, is the principle of withholding from transit any object which should normally pass from one position to another. Palming a coin in the right hand, while appearing to place it in the left, is a process belonging to this category.

In the general type of processes grouped under the heading of Interposition, the first principle set down is that of Loading. Interposition, of course, is the direct antithesis, of Concealment. It has to do with bringing into play something not employed previously; whereas Concealment indicates the putting away of things already at hand. The principle of Loading is eminently characteristic of its group. It is the most direct and most obvious method of bringing new material into a magical experiment. To cite examples in this instance would be superfluous. Even those who have but a nodding acquaintance with the principles of magic must well understand the nature of this particular item in our catalog. To prevent misunderstanding, however, we may point out that the process of loading consists in transferring a load from its hiding-place to the receptacle from which the contents of the load are to be produced. It does not consist in placing a load in a place where it can be got at when the time comes for loading it into the receptacle intended for it. A process of the latter type comes under the heading of Disposition. It is well to make this point clear, as there appears to be a certain amount of confusion about it. A performer may sometimes find it convenient to say that a chair, for instance, has been loaded, when he means that a load has been set behind a chair, ready for loading. In actual fact, his statement is quite correct; but, in a magical sense, it

is not so. Still, so long as the point is clearly understood, and the disposition of a load is not taken to be the same thing as the act of loading, there is no importance in mere choice of words. The only thing that matters is that the meaning of magical terms shall not be subject to confusion, on account of the mixed medley in which their casual use is liable to involve them.

We now come to the principle of Duplication. This includes all processes in which two objects are used where there is supposed to be only one. The familiar experiment in which a coin is apparently made to pass from one hand to another, usually through the performer's knees, is a good example of the uses to which this principle is applied.

The principle of Substitution is nearly allied to the foregoing. The actual difference between them is that, while Duplication interposes an additional object to be used in conjunction with one exactly resembling it, Substitution brings in a new object to replace one that has been destroyed or otherwise put out of use. The experiment in which a card is torn up and apparently restored, with the exception of one piece held by a member of the audience, is based upon this principle.

The last on the list of types comprised in manipulative magic is False Handling. Though not so precisely defined as the other types in this order, it is still sufficiently definite to warrant its standing as a special subdivision. As a matter of fact, several of the principles which belong to other groups may be said to represent modes of false handling. The three principles-Forcing, Securing, and Transposition-are, however, so distinctly different in their mode of application that they obviously form a separate group. For the characteristic feature common to them all and denoting the type they represent, we can find no better title than False Handling.

Forcing is the principle of controlling the selection of a particular object from among a number, while appearing to allow an entirely free choice to be made. It is, in fact, a covert form of "Hobson's choice"--take which you like, but you will only get the one I intend you to have! Its most familiar application is the forcing of a certain card from a pack, spread out fanwise. Another method is that employed in what is called "The Four Ace Trick," wherein a spectator is allowed to make a selection, and the performer interprets the meaning of the choice to be either that the chosen cards shall be used or set aside, according to whether or not they are those he wants to use.

Securing is the principle involved in all manipulative processes for insuring the availability of a certain article in the event of its being required for use. It is closely allied to the principle of Retaining, already discussed. The latter, however, is based upon the concealment of an object; whereas the securing of an object does not necessarily imply that it is concealed. Further, a retained object is merely held back when being apparently passed on, while a secured object is one that is covertly held fast. Thus, when, in the act of passing a pack to be shuffled, certain stocked cards are palmed off, those cards are said to be retained. In a false shuffle, on the other hand, when certain stocked cards are prevented from being mixed with the others, the cards thus held in place are said to be secured. Again, in the trick known as "dealing seconds," the top card is secured, and by a process of substitution the second card is

dealt instead. The principle, of course, is not confined to tricks in the handling of cards. It is the basis of every manipulation in which the position of an object, or the arrangement of objects in a particular order, is prevented from changing.

The last principle in this group is that of Transposition. It implies the secret reversal of positions respectively occupied by two or more objects. The well-known card trick called the "pass" illustrates this principle; being a device for transposing the relative positions of the two half-packs. Any other manipulative process by means of which two objects are secretly made to change places will necessarily represent an embodiment of this principle.

This brings us to the end of those principles and methods which are applicable to sleight-of-hand. They represent all that can be done in magic, by means of a performer's hands, apart from other physical aid. The limited number of such principles undoubtedly serves to indicate the fact that, in pure sleight-of-hand, a magician has but slender resources upon which to draw for his effects. Even so, the principles enumerated are not all purely manipulative in their application. A comparison of this list with that of principles available in physical magic will emphasize the limitations of unaided dexterity, in a manner that cannot fail to strike even a casual observer.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER VI

PRINCIPLES OF MENTAL MAGIC

TURNING to the order of mental magic, under the general heading of [Thought Transference](#), the first principle on the list is that of Code Work. So-called "second sight" is an example of the manner in which this principle is applied to a code of words. There are, however, in addition to verbal devices, many other tricks in which the code principle is employed. Audible and visible signals of many kinds have been arranged to form a variety of codes, for the general purpose of conveying information secretly. Signals by touch are equally available, when circumstances permit.

The most familiar code, of course, is the Morse, in which signals consisting of long and short sounds, movements or other impulses, are combined in various ways to form signs representing letters and numerals. By such means, messages can be spelled out more or less slowly. The usual method is to employ, in conjunction with the signal code, a tabular code similar to those used in cable telegraphy, in which the entries represented by brief signs, contain a comparatively large amount of information. This device is too well known to need special description. The most efficient application of the principle known as code-work is found in the performance of those who combine various devices, or at any rate do not confine themselves to one particular device or form of code. Such performances are necessarily more effective and more inscrutable than can possibly be the case with but one single device. The-so-called "silent" thought transference is very often silent only in the name, the performers talking almost as much as in the case in the ordinary "second sight" business. But, where the feats are actually performed in silence, visible signals are generally used. In fact, some exponents of the truly silent device, when presenting their experiments, might almost be mistaken for playmates in the game of "Here we go round the mulberry bush," so pronounced are the signals they adopt. In other instances, the silence is only apparent, not real. The signals are conveyed by audible means, but not such as are evident to the audience.

Secret Speech is the principle of conveying messages from one person to another by means of some concealed device, such as a speaking tube. When this principle is employed, it usually necessitates the intervention of a third person, by whom the actual speaking is done, from some position more or less remote. In this case, obviously, additional means are requisite for conveying to the intermediary the

information to be transmitted.

Secret Conveyance of Documents is a principle which, like the preceding, can only be used with the assistance of some physical device. It consists in the actual passing on of written or printed matter, the recipient having facilities for reading it in private. "Billet reading," as usually performed by two persons, illustrates the application of this principle to a device for learning the contents of sealed envelopes.

Duplicate Reading is the principle of using two similar books, newspapers, or what not, one being in the hands of the audience and the other made available secretly to a performer. A certain page or paragraph having been selected, particulars are signalled to the performer, who turns to the place notified and proceeds to read out the chosen words, apparently from the publication held by the spectator seated at a distance.

Under the general heading of Memorization, there are only two principles which have any claim to special characteristics. These are Artificial Memory and Counting Down. The former, of course, consists in the adaptation to magical purposes, of the methods of mnemonics or other systems devised for assisting or training one's memory. The principle is useful, not only in combination with devices of other kinds, but even as the basis for experiments in which memory alone is involved. The memorization, for instance, of a number of articles in prescribed order, the list being read over once only to the performer, has proved to be a most interesting item in magical entertainments. There are some persons whose memories are sufficiently retentive to enable them to perform this feat without the aid of artificial memory. They are, however, few in number.

Counting Down is the principle of committing to memory the order in which certain objects in a series are arranged. The purpose is to enable the performer to know what will follow in succession, should circumstances render that knowledge useful to him. This principle is largely adopted by gambling sharps in connection with card games. When it is the sharp's turn to deal, he memorizes the names and order of as many cards as he is able, while in the act of collecting the pack together. Making a false shuffle, he leaves the memorized cards undisturbed in the middle of the pack. When the pack is cut, the known sequence is brought, in all probability, near to the top. Thus, when the cards are dealt, a glance at his own hand will show him a great deal about those of his partner and opponents alike. The method may readily be adapted to magical purposes, and should be more generally recognized as a valuable aid in the invention of new experiments with cards.

The principles relating to the type of magic called Divination, are three in number, viz.-Clairvoyance, Discovery, and Prediction. They are, however, subtypes, rather than actual principles-forms of divination rather than fundamental methods embodied in the devices used for divination. Nevertheless, it is difficult to prescribe any form of classification more suitable in the present instance. As they stand, the terms speak for themselves. In practice, the devices assignable to each particular group are, primarily, related to principles of other types, and therefore need no special comment in this place.

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER VII

MECHANICAL PRINCIPLES

WE NOW come to magic of the physical order, and processes of the mechanical type. The principle first on the [list](#) is that of Outer Casing. This consists in the covering of an object with a superficial casing, removable at will. The casing may form a double or extra thickness, in exact replica of the real object, or may have a shape entirely different from the object it encloses. The first of these forms is illustrated by the "half-shell" used in billiard ball manipulation, and by the metal cover fitting closely over and painted to resemble a large wooden die. The second form of casing is represented by the "Passe-Passe" experiment, in which a bottle covers the glass with which it apparently changes place. Numerous examples of both forms will readily occur to the reader.

The next mechanical principle is that of Concealed Access. This may not be, perhaps, the best title available for the principle to which it relates, but we can think of none better. It implies a secret device by means of which any person or thing is enabled to pass through something that appears impenetrable, or to get at something that seems isolated beyond all human possibility of approach. Traps, sliding panels, removable parts *et hoc genus omne*, are devices in which this principle is involved.

Secret Cavity or Receptacle is the principle upon which all devices for the concealment of an object within an apparently solid structure may be said to depend. False bottoms, secret drawers, bellows tables, hollow stems, double lids, and so on, are examples of tricks upon this principle.

Diverse Formation is a principle of very common use in magic. It relates to appliances which, though apparently similar in every respect, are either wholly or in part unlike in structure. It is a principle common to many kinds of "prepared" apparatus. Thus, bevelled coins, for example, are of diverse formation. In external appearance they resemble genuine coins, with the ordinary square edges. The bevelling is so slight that it can be detected only by careful examination. It is, however, sufficient to insure that, when spun, the coin shall fall with its larger diameter upward. Cards with dissimilar halves, with convex or concave sides, with ends of different widths, and so forth, are devices upon this principle.

A good example of Diverse Formation is to be found in "The Chinese Rings." Here we have a number of rings, apparently identical in structure and condition. But, in reality, the case is far otherwise. Some few of the rings, it is true, are what they appear to be-genuinely solid and single. Of the others, one has a gap in it, and the rest are linked up in pairs and threes. It depends upon the adroitness of the performer to convey to his audience the impression that each and every ring is given out singly for examination, apparently proving the whole number to be identical in every respect. Any contrivance in which an unobtrusive alteration in shape is the essential feature will come under this heading.

Closely allied to the foregoing is the principle of Double Facing. It is sufficiently familiar, in connection with playing cards, to render comment superfluous.

Concealed Mechanism or Motive Power, also, is a principle that is well known, even to those who know little else of magic. There are innumerable devices and places for the concealment of mechanical trickeries. So vast, indeed, is the range covered by this section that, without unduly occupying space, it is impossible to give even a list of the chief forms of apparatus in which the principle is commonly embodied. Broadly, we may say that most appliances in which a trick is concealed are included in this group. Thus, the trick by means of which the performer is enabled to escape from a locked and corded box is an example of such mechanism; since concealed access alone cannot meet the case. A mere trap or sliding panel is out of the question-assuming, of course, the relative dimensions of box and performer entail a close fit, and that the rope is sufficient and properly applied. There must, necessarily, be some form of concealed mechanism comprised in the trick, whereby the performer releases himself and restores the box to its former state. In this, as in other instances where the trick by which a magical result is produced consists in mechanism, the existence or nature of which is unknown to the audience, that trick comes under the present heading. Incidentally, we may remind the reader that a "box trick" is the *trick* embodied in a box-not the *feat* of escaping from a box.

Concealed Connection is another mechanical principle, of the utmost familiarity to magicians and public alike. It is one of the three principles usually quoted, by that section of the public whose only delight at a magical performance is to explain (?) how everything is "done." The explanation given by such people, when fully engaged in showing their cleverness at a magician's expense, as a rule consists in either "wires," "machinery," or "mirrors." It may be that the effect could not possibly be produced by either wires, machinery, or mirrors, but that is of no consequence. The fact that, if the effect were actually produced by such means, it would be an absolute miracle, does not matter in the least. "Make it wires!" says the busybody, and "wires" it is, unless it may happen to be machinery or mirrors. This sort of chatter, if loud enough, will always enhance the enjoyment of surrounding spectators. In some cases of the kind, we have seen printed on the faces of those around a chatterer, enjoyment so unspeakably sincere that it would be unspeakable-in public, at any rate. But, if they only had that nuisance alone-my word! However, these common occurrences serve to show that the principle of concealed connection is one of the most familiar in the whole range of magic. From the slender thread that lifts the "rising cards" to the heavy "pull" that snatches away the

cloth thrown over a vanishing lady, the purposes to which this principle is applied in the service of magic are infinite in number and variety.

Last on the list of mechanical principles, we have Invisible Suspension. This, of course, is closely allied to concealed connection. The precise difference between the two is this: In the case of connection, invisibility is by no means essential and some form of apparent action at a distance is implied. On the other hand, invisibility is the first essential in the present case, and no action other than that of sustaining a certain weight in mid-air is implied. Partial suspensions, such as that associated with "The Fakir of Oolu," more correctly belong to the group of concealed mechanism; since the upright rod provides obvious possibilities for the intervention of mechanical support. A truly invisible suspension is one in which the weight supported is apparently isolated from all possible contact with material objects by which mechanical connection may be concealed. For this reason, the method of suspension in which the support is derived from a rod passing through the stage, behind the performer who "assists," is a concealed mechanical device, rather than an invisible suspension.

The application of this present principle is not entirely confined to the professed purpose of mysteriously causing a person or object to float in space. It is also of great utility in giving to heavy objects the appearance of lightness. This method was first introduced in connection with the illusion called "Cleopatra's Needle," in which a light framework, containing one or even two performers, could be handled with ease-the weight contained within being invisibly counterbalanced. De Kolta afterward adopted the method in his well-known illusion "*Le Cocon*."

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER VIII

OPTICAL PRINCIPLES

AMONG principles of the optical type, the first is [Mirror Masking](#). It is well known in connection with devices such as "The Sphinx," where mirrors radiating from the center of a curved or polygonal recess, and having their edges hidden by the legs of a table, are used to conceal a person behind them.

The Reflected Image principle is the converse of the preceding. Instead of masking an object, the mirrors serve to make an object appear where, in reality, none exists. The illusion introduced by Professor Pepper at the London Polytechnic, and known to magicians as "The Walker Illusion," illustrates this principle excellently.

With Professor Pepper and the Polytechnic is also associated the introduction of Transparent Reflectors. The mention of "Pepper's Ghost" is a sufficient description of the method and its mode of application to magical purposes.

Lantern Projection has been employed in magic, almost from the date of its invention by Kircher. It is, however, seldom employed by modern magicians. Except in an unusually clear atmosphere, the beam of light from the lantern is so distinctly visible, and the need for complete or semi-darkness so objectionable, that the possibilities of this principle are limited within very narrow bounds.

Background Work is the principle of masking by means of a screen, having the same color as a plain background against which it is seen. It has long been used in small effects, such as the appearance of objects within frames with black centers; the objects produced being temporarily concealed by pieces of black material, snatched away at the proper moment. Its adaptation to stage illusions proper was made by de Kolta, at the Egyptian Hall, London, in 1886. The title of "Black Magic," adopted by him for the act in which this invention was employed, has since become a technical term, denoting the use of the background principle with black material. In this sense, however, the term is liable to create false impressions. Firstly, it suggests that the use of black against black, in any way whatever, is a device which de Kolta claimed to have invented. Secondly, it suggests that de Kolta's invention was limited to black alone. Such ideas are by no means in accordance with the facts. Reference to de Kolta's patent will show that his invention relates to the obliteration of visible contour by the destruction of shadow, and that any color whatever may be used in connection

with it. In practice, the distinction between de Kolta's invention and previous applications of this principle may be said to consist in the production of effects upon a large scale, as compared with the concealment of small objects.

Chiaroscuro is a principle depending upon variations of shade and tint for the creation of deceptive appearances. The painting of a flat surface to resemble a concavity or convexity will represent an application of this principle. Similarly, the disguising of a hollow or projection to resemble a plain surface will equally fall within this category of devices. An example is the sunken cavity, used as a receptacle for small articles, in what appears to be a flat table-top, decorated with a painted or inlaid pattern.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER IX

ACOUSTIC PRINCIPLES

IN THE field of acoustics, the principles available for magical purposes are but few. But those are extremely valuable, principally in combination with methods of other types. There are, it is true, one or two well-known inventions in which this branch of physics has been made the basis for illusionary devices; but, as a rule, it is applied to magic only as an adjunct, and by way of subsidiary effect.

The first principle [of this type](#) is that of Mock Sound. It comprises all devices for the simulation of characteristic noises, such as normally occur in certain circumstances but would be lacking when things are not precisely what they seem. In magic it often happens that, since the things done and the things used are not exactly what they appear to be, sounds that would naturally accompany certain operations do not necessarily occur at the appropriate moments. Thus, if what appears to be a heavy weight is in reality nothing more than an inflated envelope, no sound will accompany the action of putting it down upon a carpeted stage. Therefore, in order to complete the illusion, it is desirable that, at the proper instant, the sound of a weight coming in contact with the floor be imitated.

In this case, of course, the best imitation is the real thing, a weight being dropped off-stage, as near as may be to the imitation article. The chief point would be to make sure that sound and action coincide. Otherwise, the "artistic verisimilitude" must become not a trifle worse than useless. In some cases, the sound accompanying a secret operation resembles that incidental to the operation apparently performed, thus avoiding all need for other simulation. An instance of this is the chinking of coins when conveyed into the palm of one's hand, while they appear to be thrown from one hand to the other. The devices for imitating characteristic sounds are many and of various kinds. Some are mechanical, like the "ticker" which gives the sound of a watch. Others are manual, like the simple devices used for imitating the rattling of covered objects which are not under the cover. Such methods, in common with the generality of this type, are well understood and require no particular reference in this place.

Conveyance of Sound is a principle which, at first sight, would seem to be capable of wide development in connection with magic.

The fact is, however, that the practical difficulties to be overcome in rendering the mode of conveyance secret or (at the least) not easy of detection, are very great. The conveyance of messages by speaking-tube a method formerly used in certain forms of so-called "second-sight," can scarcely be regarded as an adaptation of the present principle. This particular group of acoustic devices, properly speaking, includes only those intended for the conveyance of sounds audible to the audience. The illusion known as "The Invisible Orchestra" is an example of tricks upon this principle. In that invention, the sound was conveyed by wooden rods from instruments below the stage to their counterparts above. Another trick belonging to this group is that which was used in connection with "The Speaking Head" illusion. In that instance, the sound was carried by tube to a wide-mouthed orifice, and received in another attached to the head itself and thence to the mouth, from which the sounds were supposed to emanate. The device, however, was not very satisfactory in its operation. As may be anticipated, sounds so conveyed would obviously have their origin elsewhere than in the head itself. These two examples will suffice to indicate the nature of the drawbacks inherent to this principle, from a magical standpoint.

The Disguise of Sound is a principle seldom employed in magic, except in so far as it relates to drowning one sound by another. The converse application is that of preventing the occurrence of sounds, which would otherwise disclose operations intended to be kept secret. The latter object, however, is usually attained by physical means, rather than by the aid of acoustic principles. Thus the disguise of sound would ordinarily consist in the prevention of sounds not wanted and the substitution of sounds required.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER X

ELECTRICAL PRINCIPLES

IN ELECTRICITY, we have a branch of physics that has rendered substantial aid to the cause of magic. The vast reputation gained by Robert-Houdin was in no small degree due to the facilities which, in its early days, electricity placed at the disposal of magicians. At the present time, no doubt, the continual spread of scientific knowledge has robbed electrical processes of their former mystery to a very great extent. We cannot now hang up a drum with electrical tappers concealed inside it, and expect an audience to be mystified by hearing that drum played invisibly. The day for that sort of thing has gone by, never to return. Yet, in spite of its shorn grandeur, electricity still remains a most valuable servant to the magician who takes the trouble to become its master.

Among magicians at large, there exists some prejudice against electricity, on the ground of its supposed uncertainty. There is an idea that electrical devices are essentially unreliable, and are subject to frequent failure at critical moments. It may be said at once, so far as electricity itself is concerned, that this charge of alleged unreliability is entirely without foundation. And with regard to electrical appliances, when a failure occurs it is due to some mechanical fault, ninety-nine times out of a hundred; and the fact of electricity being used as the motive power has nothing to do with the matter. If only the apparatus is properly constructed and installed, the electricity upon which its operation depends may be relied upon absolutely. There is no form of energy more certain in its action. But if the construction and installation of the mechanical devices are not efficiently carried out, there are bound to be failures and many of them. Then, in all probability, the blame will fall unjustly upon the electricity; instead of falling, as it ought, upon the tinker who made the appliances and the landscape gardener who put them in place.

It may be admitted, without argument, that the conditions in which electricity has to act when used for magical purposes, differ immensely from those with which it is normally associated elsewhere. The devices it has to control, when used in magic, are necessarily "tricky" in both structure and operation. For this reason, a motive power such as that of electricity, which depends for its efficiency upon the making of proper connections, necessitates some care in adaptation to the special circumstances of the case. This simply means that, if worked by electricity, tricky devices of faulty

construction are more liable to play tricks than if they are operated mechanically. The moral is that string and sealing wax, not to mention elastic bands and tacks, are not fit associates for electricity. Primitive materials of that nature may consort well enough with a box of conjuring tricks, as advertised; but an agent so refined as electricity demands other and better means for its employment.

The first principle set down [in this group](#) is the Conveyance of Power through Supports. Here, of course, entirely stationary and solid supports are understood. In other types of physical magic, there are devices by which power is conveyed through pillars, legs, cords, chains, or what not, to the appliances thereby supported. But in those other types, the devices must include some mechanical trickery in their construction, and some movement of or within the support itself. In the case of electricity, no such requirement exists. Electrical energy demands for its conveyance nothing beyond a continuous metallic circuit--a "line-wire" leading the current from a battery to the device it operates and a "return-wire" completing the circuit by leading back again to the battery. Thus two conductors are always necessary for electrically operated mechanism. These may readily be formed, either in or by the supports themselves. If the support is in itself a conductor, it will require to be insulated from all other conductors except the battery connection. If it is a non-conductor, a metallic core or other conducting attachment must be provided. Obviously, there must be two supports at least, if the current is actually conducted thereby. If there is only a single support, an insulated path must be provided internally. The double path being available, all that remains is to make sure of good contact between the ends of the two conductors and their appropriate connections. All being in order, one has only to press the button and electricity will do the rest.

The next electrical principle on the list is that of Trigger Action by Electric Current. In this, we have a means which should be useful for many purposes in the practice of magic. We say it should be so, because it has not as yet been adopted as frequently as its merits appear to deserve. The principle consists in the use of an electromagnet for releasing a motive power already stored up in a piece of apparatus. Thus any form of clockwork may be started or stopped, by moving its detent electrically. A supply of compressed air may be turned on and off, a spring released, or a weight allowed to fall. In short, there are a thousand and one operations in which trigger action is used, that may be most conveniently controlled by an electromagnet. There is also a great advantage in the fact that the magnet need have no contact with the device it moves. Its attraction will pass through all substances save those which are themselves magnetic. Therefore, so long as the distance across which the action has to take effect is not too great, the magnet and its "keeper" may be insulated from each other entirely.

The "Crystal Casket" of Robert-Houdin had another form of trigger-action by electric current. At a given instant, a wire, electrically heated, was caused to release coins concealed within the structure of the casket. Many devices of a similar character have been employed from time to time. The modern tendency, however, appears to be to rely upon threads, and primitive contrivances of that nature, rather than to adopt the more refined electrical methods. In some instances, no doubt, limitations of space would prevent the use of an electro-magnetic release; but, more often than not, it is

possible to find room for some compact form of magnet. Therefore, it seems a pity that this convenient agency should be allowed to fall into such undeserved neglect.

The principle of communication by means of Electrotelegraphy or Telephony is so well understood, and its utility and convenience for special purposes of magic are so obvious, that nothing need be said about it by way of explanation or illustration.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic
by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER XI

CHEMICAL AND MOLECULAR PRINCIPLES

THE APPLICATION of Chemistry to the production of magical effects is of ancient date. Among the earliest technical records are to be found descriptions of experiments upon a chemical basis. Not always strictly magical, it is true; but, very often, of a nature well adapted to the requirements of magic, as we regard it today. Of the former kind, the experiment sometimes described as being designed "To terrify with a great Noise without Gunpowder" is an example. "To seem to turn Water into Wine," however, is one of the very old experiments which are not yet out of date, and probably will survive for many generations to come. Indeed, so far as chemical magic is concerned, many of the older books strike one as being very nearly as up-to-date as are some of the most modern. The ancient textbooks, of course, contain descriptions of hypothetical effects, presumably supposed to have a chemical basis, but which, in the light of common sense, can be regarded only as survivals of superstition. Such an experiment, or series of experiments, is that "Of Magical Lights, Lamps, Candles, etc.," quoted in "*The Conjuror's Repository*," a book published toward the end of the eighteenth century. The weird and wonderful effects attributed to the burning of certain oily compounds prescribed in the description given, seem to a modern reader the conceptions of a disordered intellect. Still, there is every reason to suppose that the authors who wrote that kind of nonsense had implicit faith in the nostrums they mentioned. We are bound to believe that, in describing some impossible and horrible thing as "both easy and pleasant to do," they had every confidence in their own veracity. Not only so, they had equal confidence in the reliability of those other persons, from whom their information had been derived. Needless to say, the writers could never have tried the experiments for themselves; or the failures they must inevitably have experienced would, at least, have convinced them that the word "easy" was out of place in their account of the matter.

The first chemical principle in the [list](#) is the Apparent Transformation of Substance. In most cases, the transformation is not only apparent, but also real. An illustration of this fact is seen in the experiment, already mentioned, of turning water into wine. The transformation is brought about by effecting a real change of chemical combination. The effect, however, is only apparent, in the sense that the supposed water and wine

are not both what they appear to be. The water, perhaps, may be genuine-perhaps not. But, in any event, one may feel certain that what is apparently wine has nothing of the grape in its composition. Still, even that characteristic is not uncommon among commercial vintages, unrelated to the practice of magic.

What we mean, then, by the "apparent" transformation of substance is the changing of what appears to be a particular material or product (e.g., water) into what appears to be one of entirely different nature or composition (e.g., wine). This principle is often employed in combination with mechanical devices, whereby the chemical changes are supplemented and rendered more impressive. By such means, the effect produced is made far more striking than would be the case were chemistry alone employed. It may be accepted as a general rule that, with a mechanical amplification of some suitable kind, skilfully contrived and efficiently manipulated, any form of chemical change is likely to become far more valuable in magic than it could possibly be made apart from such embellishment.

The principle of Ignition by chemical means is especially familiar in connection with chlorate of potash and sugar, the igniting reagent being sulphuric acid. Undoubtedly, the cleanest and safest method for bringing the acid into contact with the other ingredients, as and when required, is that of confining it within capillary tubes of glass, sealed at either end. One of these tubes, together with a pinch of chlorate mixture, being twisted up in a scrap of "flash-paper," a slight pressure serves to break the tube and, thus liberating the acid, to ignite the whole.

The principle of chemical ignition, however, is by no means confined to this special device in magic. There are many other reactions, by which heat or flame may be produced, and which are equally adaptable to the magician's requirements. Notably, the spontaneous combustion resulting from the application of water to potassium is commonly used in connection with "fire-bowls," as they are called. These appliances are, generally speaking, made in the form of shallow dishes, the edges of which are deeply recurved, and their centers fitted with upright metallic points. A pellet of potassium being impaled upon the central pin, the bowl is turned edgewise up and a sufficient quantity of water and sulphuric ether poured into the hollow rim. So long as the bowl remains edge up, nothing happens beyond evaporation of ether. But as soon as the vessel is turned into a horizontal position, the water comes into contact with the potassium; the hydrogen liberated by the chemical combination that ensues is ignited by the resultant heat and in turn sets fire to the ether.

Whatever form of chemical ignition is adopted, the means for conveying the flame to the material finally burned must receive some consideration. Usually the ignition is applied to some readily combustible substance, such as the flash-paper or ether already mentioned. In some special cases, handkerchiefs or other fabrics of cotton are treated with the nitro-sulphuric acid used in making flash-paper--thus being converted into a true gun-cotton. These, of course, are readily fired by chemical reagents. But when some slow-burning substance has to be ignited, the semi-explosive combustion of such mixtures as that of sugar and potassium chlorate is too short in duration to act with certainty. Instead of setting fire to the substance that requires burning, the sudden flash

may only produce smoldering. Therefore, it becomes necessary to supplement the chemical device by some material, sufficiently rapid in combustion to be instantly lighted, but not so rapid as to burn out before the intended substance has caught fire. For this purpose, there is probably nothing better than an ordinary match. Consequently, if the latter is used, mechanical ignition may be found no less convenient and far less complicated than any chemical method.

Change of Color by Chemical Reaction is, properly speaking, and apart from change of substance, a principle seldom used in practical magic. It relates exclusively to change of color without change of form or substance; and must not be confused with such incidental color changes as occur in experiments that relate to the apparent changing of one substance to another. The general mode of application consists in treating a fabric or other material with some chemical which, when acted upon by another and thus modified either in chemical composition or physical condition, changes its former hue completely. The blue coloration of litmus in the presence of an alkali, and its change to red when acted upon by an acid, may be quoted as an example of such effects in general. Again, the bleaching action of sulphurous acid, either in the form of vapor or in its nascent state, as liberated by chemical reaction is a well-known means for destroying color. It is commonly used in experiments with supposed ink and water, the acid being liberated from sodium hyposulphite, as a rule. In fact, many of the reagents used in producing apparent change of substance or composition are equally applicable to change of color alone.

Invisible Writing is a principle almost as old as the hills. Ovid, for instance, mentions several devices by which messages can be written invisibly, even upon a vehicle so unsuspecting as the skin of a lady's serving-maid, and rendered legible by the person for whom they are intended. The ancient textbooks of magic contain numerous recipes for secret writing; a large proportion, however, being manipulative in character rather than chemical, come under the heading of preparation. Still the principle of invisible writing by chemical agency was perfectly familiar to the ancients, as the recipes for "Sympathetic Inks" and so forth clearly prove. In a general sense, it may be said that this present principle is but a special application of that relating to color changes in general. Chemical reactions which are applicable to change of color upon a larger scale, will often apply equally well to the writing of messages with colorless liquids, which may be colored by special treatment.

Molecular principles, in so far as they relate to magic, are so nearly allied to those of chemistry that it is difficult to dissociate one from the other. We have an illustration of this general difficulty in the color changes produced in litmus by the action of acids and alkalies, respectively. Although the litmus becomes blue in the presence of an alkali and red when made acid, there is no reason to suppose that any definite chemical change accompanies the change in color. Again, when the mixture of two chemical solutions produces a solid compound, the physical difference is undoubtedly due to a change in chemical combination. The change of color in litmus, and the change of state from liquid to solid in the chemical mixture, are both molecular in character. Yet the first cannot occur in the absence of chemical reagents, while the second is absolutely dependent upon chemical combination. Therefore, it is advisable to limit the molecular

group of magical processes to those in which chemistry has clearly no prominent part.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

Our Magic

The Art in Magic -- The Theory of Magic

by Nevil Maskelyne

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)

CHAPTER XII

MAGICAL INVENTIONS

THE IMPORTANCE of the subject dealt with in this chapter can admit of no argument whatever. Both practically and theoretically, it is one of the most vital topics comprised in the whole range of magical studies. From a technical standpoint, it represents the goal toward which the aims of every honorable magician are directed, when seeking to add to his repertoire-and, incidentally, to his reputation.

Like all else in the world, magic cannot stand still. It must either advance with the times, or fall behind them. And, in this connection, the one quality which above all others is essential to progress is novelty. Without novelty in some form or other, nothing can be achieved in the way of progress. Every step forward is necessarily a new step. It breaks new ground, opens up new views, and involves a definite change of position. In short, it represents novelty in every sense of the word. In magic, as in all other forms of applied science, the terms novelty and invention are synonymous. Without invention there can be no novelty; and without novelty there can be no invention. In view of these facts, it is evident that any treatise upon magical technics, in which the subject of invention is not dealt with, must be incomplete and unsatisfactory.

In the present chapter, therefore, we shall discuss the nature of magical inventions, and the means by which such inventions may be evolved. Not, let it be understood, the means whereby all the inventions in magic have been and are to be made. There are constantly being produced, in every branch of human activity, inventions which even their own inventors could not trace to a definite origin. It is quite possible, however, to demonstrate certain means, available to those who seek real advancement, by the aid of which the work of invention may be greatly facilitated, and in some instances actually brought to completion. It is in this connection that the value of theoretical study is most prominently displayed.

There can be little doubt that, however interesting in itself the theory of magic may be, it will receive but scant attention from those who live by magic unless the study of this particular branch of the subject can be shown to have a monetary value. It is not in human nature to adopt any other attitude upon such a question. The man who has his living to gain is bound to give his chief attention to the making of profits. So, if there is no money to gain by the study of theory, most men will give theory the coldest of cold shoulders. But, as it happens, technical theory usually is worth money to those who understand it. In the case of magic, no less than in other callings of a professional character, the results to which theoretical knowledge may lead can be valued in

shekels of gold and shekels of silver.

That novelties connected with magic are extremely valuable, must be patent to all. The avidity with which such novelties are sought on every hand, to say nothing of the importance attached to them by their inventors, would suffice to prove their value even if all other evidence were lacking. Hence, if it can be shown that the theory of magic constitutes a substantial aid to the production of novelties, its importance to the welfare of magicians will need no further demonstration. That is what we propose to show.

We feel sure that much of the plagiarism, too common among magicians, is due to the fact that writers upon magical topics have usually given but little incentive to original effort. Instead of putting forward stimulating suggestions, the rule has been to deal only with bald statements and descriptions which, apart from higher knowledge, can only foster a spirit of servile imitation. In the unwarrantable glorification of "how it is done," the far more worthy consideration of "how to do what has not yet been done" seems to have been almost entirely forgotten. The beaten track, and that only in disconnected sections, is what the student of magic apparently is expected to regard as his sole field of investigation. The need for seeking new paths, or even for tracing the connection between familiar sections of the old track, is an idea of which one seldom if ever receives a hint. To some extent, at any rate, we hope to remedy this very prevalent fault. By indicating sources of inspiration available to all, and pointing out systematic methods of working, we may possibly aid original effort on the part of some who have hitherto been content to snatch at crumbs, so to speak, from the tables of other men.

In the first place, then, we must define what constitutes an invention, magical or otherwise. This is extremely necessary, because so many people have but vague ideas upon the subject. Some do not realize the difference between an invention and a discovery. Others do not even realize the difference between an invention and an idea. Yet it should be obvious to all that an invention must necessarily be an example of applied science. Therefore, even the newest discovery or the newest idea cannot be regarded as an invention. It is only when the discovery has been embodied in some particular device, or the idea has been worked out in some practical form, that we have an invention. And even then the invention relates to the particular construction or method involved, and not necessarily to the discovery or the idea upon which the invention has been based.

For example, let us take the case of the steam-engine. It is commonly said that this invention was made by James Watt. But, was it? Certainly not! Hero of Alexandria constructed a steam-engine two thousand years before Watt's invention was made. Must we then, ascribe to Hero the invention of the steam-engine? By no means. His invention and the nineteenth century steam-engine are as unlike as chalk and cheese. The simple fact is that nobody invented the steam-engine, but various persons have invented various kinds of steam-engines. Among those persons, James Watt takes a prominent place as the inventor of that form of engine in which the pressure of steam is utilized by means of cylinder and piston. Thus, the use of steam pressure as a source of energy is a *general* principle, to which nobody can lay claim. It is an obvious application of the discovery that steam can produce pressure. The utilization of a reciprocating piston, as a means for converting the molecular energy of steam into mechanical or kinetic energy, is a *specific* principle, with the development of which James Watt must for all time be associated. Hero's invention was based upon another specific principle, differing entirely from that of Watt, viz:--the reaction, upon a movable arm, of steam escaping at right angles to it. It is

the same form of -reaction that causes a sky rocket to ascend, and which, as derived from water pressure, was utilized in the invention known as Barker's Mill. The converse principle, that of producing motion by the direct *action* of escaping steam instead of by its *reaction*, has been adopted by Parsons in the invention of his admirably efficient steam-turbine.

From the foregoing instances, most of which must be entirely familiar to the majority of our readers, the true nature of an invention may readily be deduced. For example, it is entirely wrong to say that the steam-engine was ever invented at all. "*The steam-engine*" implies and comprises *all* steam-engines; or, at any rate, a common basis which all inventors of such engines have utilized. There is only one such basis-that of steam-pressure. The use of steam-pressure as a means for supplying power, however, is an idea which must inevitably occur to anyone knowing that steam can produce pressure. Left undeveloped, that idea would remain a mere idea, and nothing more. In any event, it could not represent an invention. When that obvious idea had been developed by the invention of a steam-engine, it became a general principle to which all possible forms of steam-engines are referable. In like manner, the specific principles evolved by successive inventors must each represent a particular basis upon which subsequent inventors might found new inventions. Thus, the cylinder and piston principle of Watt was applied by Stephenson to land locomotives, and by Fulton (though his claim to priority is contested) to the propulsion of vessels. Yet we cannot say that Stephenson invented the locomotive engine, or Fulton the steamship. All we can say, with truth, is that Stephenson invented a locomotive and Fulton a steamship. The application of the specific principle, originated by Watt, to the propulsion of vehicles, either on land or on water, is a mere idea which any booby might conceive. And any booby, having conceived that idea, would believe that he had made an invention. So far, then, we have arrived at the following definitions: A General Principle is a basis for classification of inventions in definite groups, according to fundamental characteristics common to each group respectively.

A Specific Principle is a basis for invention, and may itself constitute an invention.

An Invention consists in the production of some novelty, in either principle, construction method, or purpose, not merely put forward as a vague idea but worked out in practicable form. The novelty it comprises, but that novelty alone, can be protected by patent.

An Idea is a conception, which may or may not turn out to be practicable or valuable, but which has not been developed by embodiment in an invention. It cannot be protected by patent because it discloses no inventive achievement, no practical application of a specific principle; and, therefore, is not an invention. It is simply a suggestion or notion, which some inventor might perhaps think worthy of development. But until that inventor's work has been done, the idea itself must remain but a suggested possibility-at the best a problem which, in the end, may prove to be not worth the trouble of solving.

Having these definitions for our guidance, we may justly believe that we stand on safe ground. Since an invention essentially comprises some definite element of novelty, not merely in conception, but in the practical application of a specific principle, it is quite easy to indicate certain sources from which inventions may be derived. The common impression that inventive genius necessarily consists in a faculty for conceiving new ideas, is quite erroneous. It depends primarily upon a faculty for exercising the imagination upon possible combinations hitherto unknown. The man who possesses the latter faculty, by accident of birth, is a born inventor. But

inventors are not necessarily born. They can also be made. What has been withheld by nature may to a great extent be supplied by training. The man who wants to invent, but does not know how to invent, can learn to invent if he will but take the trouble. There are few men who need despair of becoming inventors. So long as a man has sufficient imagination to form some idea of what would be the immediate result, for example, if it were known for certain that the world would come to an end tomorrow, or if the whole of mankind suddenly turned vegetarian, he has an inventor's chief qualification. The man who has no imagination cannot expect to gain the power of foreseeing possibilities and anticipating results, without which no invention can be made.

In the training of an inventor, then, the first essential is the cultivation of that most valuable of all mental gifts--imagination. There is a very common notion that time spent in imagining things must be time wasted. Yet the actual fact is that the most successful men are those who are able to imagine things not yet in existence, and the means for bringing those things about. Such men are not dreamers; they are men of imagination. Between the two classes there is a vast difference. The dreamer is one who dallies with mental images--with hazy visions of what might be, if only somebody else would do something or other. The man of imagination, on the other hand, is one who exercises his brains upon problems relating to work which he himself intends to carry through, when those problems have been mentally solved. That is the kind of imagination an inventor wants.

The faculty next in importance to that of imagination is the power of observation. It is undoubtedly true that inspirations seldom come to those who do not look for them. Equally true is it that there is little use in looking for inspiration unless one knows where and how to look. Therefore, it is necessary that an inventor's power of observation be well trained--not only in looking out for inspirations, but also in recognizing the channels through which inspiration may possibly come.

One of the most extraordinary facts concerning invention in general is the evolution of conceptions in unbroken sequence. The inventor begins working out a certain problem he has conceived; and, as he proceeds, there grow out of his work suggestions which may lead to many new inventions. Each of these, again, may lead to further inspirations; and so on indefinitely. As a general rule, inventions are not derived from accidental ideas, happy thoughts, or heaven-born revelations. Their origin is in the fact that inventors are always on the lookout for sources of inspiration, and always endeavoring to imagine novel combinations and novel applications of familiar devices. When in the course of his work an inventor finds some detail lacking, which known devices or methods cannot supply, he is led to seek out in imagination a new device or a new method--it may be even a new principle--that will fulfil his requirements. Having a definite aim in view, and the ability to imagine possible means for achieving that aim, the chances are a hundred to one that he will find what he wants. Thus, an inventor's work consists, not in a happy-go-lucky waiting for inspiration, but in laborious effort devoted to the building up, mainly from fragments of existing knowledge, of complete structures which possess the element of novelty, in some form or other. It is for this reason that the art of invention is capable of being taught; or rather, learned. Although there is much to be learned, very little instruction can be given. That little, however, is the small key which opens a very big door.

In the present instance, what we have to do is to point out to the would-be inventor of magical novelties, where to seek for inspiration, and how to make use of it when obtained; always

provided, of course, that the aspirant to inventive ability has learned to use his eyes and to exercise his imagination. Of course, the man who has a native talent for invention is bound to be more successful than one who has not that advantage. That goes without saying. Nevertheless, a wide field exists for the work of those who, without special gifts, are willing to do their best toward inventing things for themselves.

In magic, as in all other directions, the chief source from which inventors derive their inspirations is the work already done. But this is where one wants to know where and how to search. It is absolutely useless to read magical works, or inspect magical devices, and then confine one's attention to what has been read or seen. One must not look at just what is directly in view; one must look all round it, above it, and beyond it. One must not look at each invention singly, just for the sake of admiring or copying it. One must seek for what may be got out of it, put into it, or suggested by it. In almost every case there will be found something that may prove useful, if not immediately, then at some future time.

The most desirable discovery, of course, is a new specific principle.

That is, therefore, the first thing for which one should be on the lookout. Next to that comes the suggestion of a novel combination of details, or a novel application for existing devices or principles. After having conceived a basis upon which some novel invention may be produced, the real work of an inventor begins. So, at the outset, it is advisable to attempt something not too elaborate. In this respect, at all times, an inventor must be guided by a knowledge of the facilities he has for doing the necessary work of design and construction, or of getting it done by others. And, further, it must be remembered that such work, to the uninitiated, usually seems a lot easier to do than they will find it if they try to do it themselves. Still, if it is worth doing, a man of energy will always find means for putting it through.

Since an ounce of practice is worth a pound of theory, according to the proverb, we cannot do better than to show that an ounce of theory can be made worth many pounds in practice. For this purpose we propose to invent a magical novelty, for the reader's benefit; and to describe, step by step, the process of its evolution. Having done so, we will, further, point out such possibilities of future development as may be suggested by the invention as it stands. At the same time, we give our word of honor that the invention shall have been solved precisely in the manner described; and shall not be one already existing, that has been dissected and analyzed for the purpose of making up a story.

In order to begin at the most elementary condition possible, we take for our starting point a general principle; preferably, one that is not commonly employed. We shall select that of trigger-action by an electro-magnet, and see what can be done with it. To this end, of course, our first aim must be to ascertain, so far as possible, what has already been done upon the principle we have adopted. According to our present knowledge, it would appear that there is but one specific principle upon which magical apparatus embodying an electro-magnetic trigger has ever been constructed. That is the principle of concealing, within the appliance containing mechanism controlled by trigger, an electro-magnet to which the current is conveyed through suspending wires. Such being the case, we must get away from that principle if possible. The most obvious way of so doing is to put the magnet somewhere outside the apparatus containing the trigger mechanism, and do away with the suspending wires.

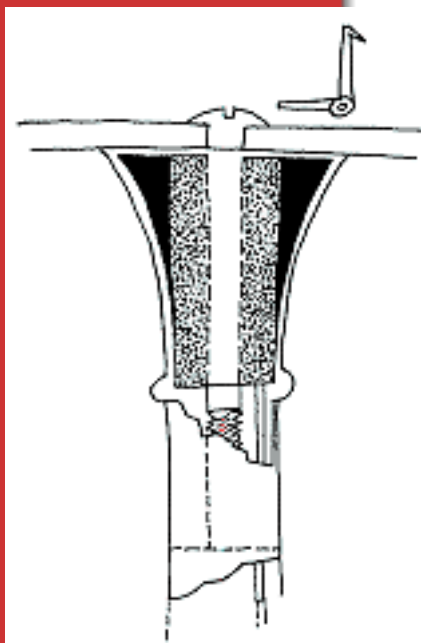


Fig. 1

device.

The next consideration will be the means of exciting the electromagnet from without. The most convenient connection, of course, is through the feet of the table. The tripod and pillar, being of metal, will provide one of the conductors; the other may readily be made by passing an insulated wire down the hollow stem, and thence (in a groove on the under side of one of the legs) to an insulated metal stud fixed into the foot. With this method, one end of the bobbin wire would be connected to the metal tube, and the other end to the wire passing down within it. Two metal discs on the floor, apparently carpet pins, would form the terminal ends of the battery circuit. Upon one of these would stand the insulated stud, and upon the other would be placed either of the solid feet of the tripod. Fig. 2 shows the method of fixing the insulated block, with a metal stud connected to the inner wire which, in Fig. 1, is seen passing down from the bobbin.

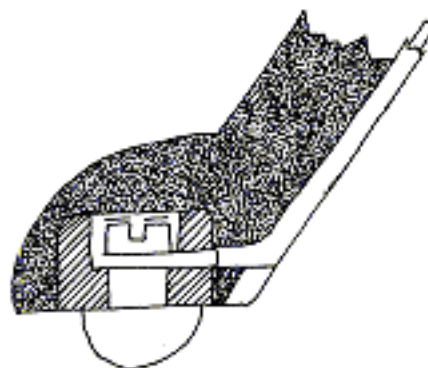
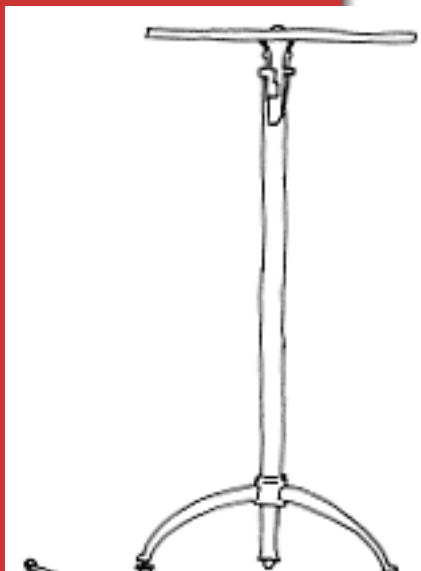


Fig. 2

Fig. 3 shows the complete arrangement, with battery and operating key represented diagrammatically. In Fig. 1 is indicated approximately the position in which a catch or detent should be placed for operating by the concealed electro-magnet.

Fig. 4 is a plan of the table-top. The central screw, marked *a*, is the inner pole of the magnet, and the annular ring *b* is the outer pole.

Fig. 5 shows the best way of applying the arrangement to the release of clockwork or other source of energy within a case of any kind. Needless to say, the parts concerned in conveying magnetic force between the two poles should be of iron, and should form the shortest magnetic path. For this reason the metal disc which forms the upper cheek of the bobbin should not be



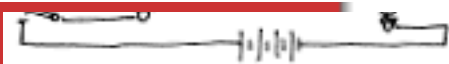


Fig. 3

attraction of anything outside.

nicked. Otherwise, nickel being a magnetic metal, a coating upon the disc which fills in the mouth of the magnet would tend to form an alternative path of their magnetism, and thus minimize the

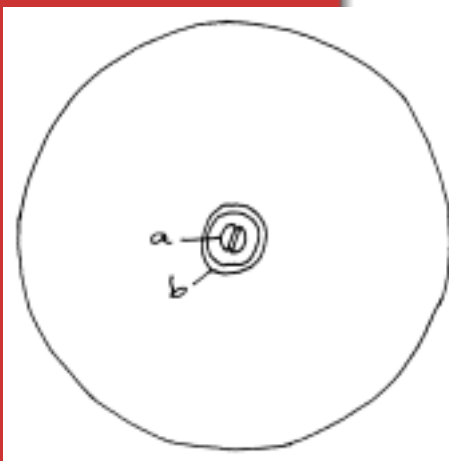


Fig. 4

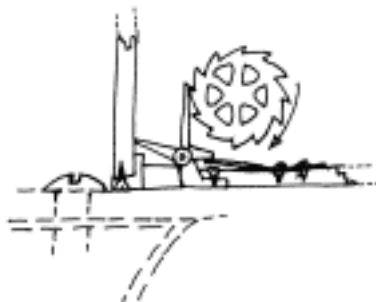


Fig. 5

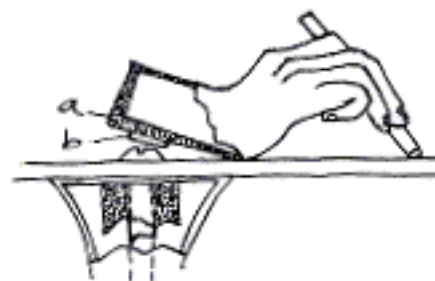


Fig. 6

Having reached this point, we can imagine some magicians saying that they do not see much in the device above described. It is all very well, in its way, but what can one do with it? To this we answer that one may do with it so many things that it is impossible to foresee more than a minute fraction of the number. This is a question which involves one of the most important points we have in view, the insistence upon which is one of our chief objects in writing this book.

The common tendency among magicians is to appreciate only those devices in which some practical application has been cut and dried; which have been definitely embodied in the production of some particular effect. When every detail has been worked out, when the stage business has been organized, the manipulation arranged and the effect obtained, then only is a device worthy of consideration. The possibilities associated with a device, the purposes to which it may be applied, the money to be made out of it by the exercise of thought and initiative, are passed over as of no account. So long as the device has not been actually used in connection with some successful production, it has no value in the eyes of far too many among those who practise magic, either professionally or as amateurs. This tendency we most earnestly wish to combat; for it is the chief obstacle to be removed before magic can take its proper place in the world's progress. So long as an appreciable contingent of magical performers remain content merely to buy, beg, borrow, or steal from others--to do nothing beyond that which others have done, to aim at nothing higher than a slavish imitation of original work, to have no use for anything that does not come to hand complete, lock, stock and barrel--so long will magic remain condemned to unmerited disrepute.

The little invention we have described will show how small is the need for reliance upon other people, in obtaining novelties. In the whole description there is not included one single detail that is new, in actual fact. Yet, taken as a whole, it constitutes a novel method, capable of being patented. Not only so, it comprises a specific principle that is quite new and may be made the basis of many further inventions. Nevertheless, it has been arrived at by no stroke of genius, but merely by the putting of this and that together, in connection with a general principle selected haphazardly. It is an example of the facility with which inventions may be made, by systematic

use of the advantages gained by studying the theory of a subject, instead of blindly trusting to luck for possible inspiration. If, instead of waiting for something to turn up, one looks around upon what already exists, to note the directions in which there appears some promise of useful development, the aid of theoretical knowledge will always render the creation of novelties a matter of no great difficulty. So vast an amount of knowledge and so manifold an array of inventions are already common property, that one need only ring the changes upon existing combinations, to produce something novel in one sense or another.

There is also another point worth considering and one to which we do not remember any reference being made in works dealing with magic. It is this. The work of originating an invention is, by far, the most pleasant and least laborious of all that has to be done in the course of its evolution. The work inseparable from the perfecting of minor details is the most tedious and the most trying. Thus the man who invents something original has compensations of no mean order, which are denied to one who merely takes up the threads, woven by another man, at the point where all originality ceases. It follows that, since the man who appropriates a magical invention has still to do all the detail work connected with it, he would be far more agreeably and profitably employed had he taken the little extra trouble required for bringing out something of his own creation.

Returning to our present invention, it is obviously capable of being adapted to two general purposes. One is the operation of a detent, or trigger device, the other is the direct production of movement. In the latter case, of course, the range of movement must not be greater than the magnetic attraction will bridge with certainty. These two purposes, it will be seen, relate to a wide range of existing effects in magic, and will yet relate to a far wider range in the magical inventions of years to come. Although it is impossible here to deal with this side of the question in any adequate manner, we shall just glance at one or two applications of the principle, and point out one or two ideas which those applications suggest.

Among well-known trigger devices, the "Crystal Casket" of Robert-Houdin naturally occurs to mind. The reader will remember that this casket was a small box, rectangular in shape, having glass sides, bottom and lid, mounted in a framework of metal. In the center of the lid was an ornament of embossed metal, sufficiently large to conceal a few coins. The inner plate of this ornament formed a cover for the coins, holding them in place and being secured with a piece of thread. The latter was in contact with a fine wire, which became red hot when a current of electricity was passed through it. Thus, at the proper moment, the coins were released, and allowed to fall upon the glass below. In an apparatus of this kind, if placed upon the table above described instead of being hung upon wires, a simple catch could replace the burnt thread. Probably more effective would be a device loaded into (say) a borrowed hat standing upon the table. Then the coins would be heard to fall upon the table itself.

In the case of an appliance with glass sides and metal edges, such as Robert-Houdin's casket, it might be possible to utilize the familiar "split coins," folding them up within the metal framework. The glass would then be absolutely free from opaque excrescences, behind or within which the coins could be hidden from view. A florin, when cut into four strips, would require a cavity only five-sixteenths of an inch in width. This might readily be provided within the metal framing of a small glass box. A simple flap, magnetically released, would be all the mechanism required for securing the coins until the moment of their production.

In connection with the second class of applications (where the magnet, instead of controlling a release, produces direct and visible motion), an example is illustrated in Fig. 6. That figure shows an adaptation of the present invention to de Kolta's tapping hand. It will be seen that the only addition to the hand itself consists in a thin strip of iron concealed within the wrist. The lower end of the strip is placed in proximity to the outer pole of the magnet, while its other extremity stands above the central screw which forms the inner magnetic pole. The attraction between the center screw and the iron strip, which will occur whenever a current flows through the bobbin wire, draws down the wrist and tilts up the fingers of the hand. On interrupting the current, the magnet ceases to act, and the fingers fall again upon the table-top. A small glass bead or other hard substance, attached to the middle finger, will give the required "tap," readily heard in all parts of a large theater. So long as the object to be moved can be made light enough, the possible amplitude of motion, obtainable by systems of leverage, may be comparatively large. For example, it would be quite practicable, given plenty of current, to produce an effect such as "The Rising Cards," by direct movement from the table magnet. Or, again, it might be practicable to load on to an article standing upon the table a card or other flat object lying unobserved upon the table-top.

Another idea suggested by this device is the use of a steel magnet in place of the iron armature. In that case, two different movements could be made to occur at will, in accordance with the direction of the current passing through the magnet-bobbin. Thus, when the poles of the table magnet are given the same sign as those of the permanent magnet nearest to them, the latter will be repelled. Reversing the current, of course, reverses the polarity of the electro-magnet, and then the permanent magnet is attracted. In this way, two distinct motions may be finally produced, two distinct trigger actions released, or two distinct motive powers controlled.

This magnetic form of control has an advantage that no possible device of a mechanical nature can possess. It enables one to produce effects such as those we have just mentioned, in an absolutely clean manner, even under a stranger's very eyes. This in itself is no small matter, seeing how much depends, very often, upon the impression a performer can make upon "the man from the audience." When in addition the method involves nothing likely to arouse suspicion, and also reduces risk of detection to a minimum, there is good reason for believing that it is a good thing, well worth turning to account.

Before concluding this section of our book, we would once again impress upon magicians of repute, and also upon aspirants to that rank, the need that exists for original work. No doubt it is very interesting to reproduce effects that other men have originated, to practise manipulations that other men have introduced-in short, to do clever or effective things with which other men have achieved success. But looking at the matter fairly and squarely, it becomes evident that achievements of that subordinate character are of no very great account. So far as personal merit is concerned, second-hand magic at the best cannot do more than show a performer's ability to repeat a lesson he has learned. With regard to the art of magic and its progress, such work can have but little value indeed. Those who are constantly looking out for novelties to imitate should remember these facts. In truth, one had far better take up old inventions, which give no chance for imitating any living artist, than to stand confessed a second-rate performer who can do nothing unless dry-nursed by abler men. Not only so, it is most likely that nine spectators out of ten will assume that the new but second-hand productions have been appropriated illegitimately: in other words, have been stolen from the original inventors. That kind of practice can do but little good to

the performer himself, and is bound to do great harm to his calling. People can have but small respect for a profession in which the chief aim of its members, as a rule, is to acquire other men's ideas, instead of being to emulate the success of other men, while avoiding the blind imitation of things already done.

There is only one course of action by which the art of magic can be advanced and the repute of the magical profession enhanced. That is, for each one of us to put his shoulder to the wheel, and do all he can toward pushing forward. It is beyond question that time and effort given to the mere imitation of another man's work can be nothing more than time and effort misspent, in going over old ground; whereas, by striving to break new ground, every step and every effort must be of some service to the art and to its followers alike. Not only so, it must be clear to everybody, either in the magical profession or out of it, that there is far more money in original work than in the unnecessary repetition of past history. Not that the average imitator considers his work unnecessary. On the contrary, he feels that, by scrambling after colorable imitations of all the latest novelties, he is "keeping up to date." That is a curious fallacy, since, beyond all question, the man who works on those lines must always arrive a day after the fair. He can never be up to date, because he perpetually lags behind, waiting his chance to follow in the wake of somebody else.

The simple fact is that to condemn oneself to an arduous struggle for existence and a second-rate position at the best, when better fortune lies within reach, can only be described as sheer folly. To the man who will arouse his mind to some sense of initiative and will open his eyes to facts that stare him in the face, the doing of original work in magic requires scarcely more effort than would be necessary in imitating work already done. We do not question the fact that some men, more than others, have the faculty for conceiving new ideas. That is so in every calling that gives men a chance of using their brains. In every kind of work, mental or physical, there are bound to be degrees of skill, higher and lower, to which various workers respectively attain. In no case can all be equally skilful. Even the road-sweeper, who displays a positive genius for scavenging the open roadway, may prove incompetent when confronted with the task of clearing the gutters.

In magic, as in all other forms of human activity, it cannot be expected that all workers will have an equal facility in carrying out the work that lies before them. At the same time, it may be expected, with justice, that every individual magician shall add his contribution to the sum of magical achievement, according to the talents with which he has been endowed by nature. That is all we have a right to expect; but it is the least he has a right to give, in exchange for the value he receives from others. The man who is absolutely incapable of original work in magic is unfitted for practising the art, and should seek for a more appropriate calling. The man who could but will not do such work, should be sent to Coventry by all magicians who have self-respect, and, therefore respect their profession.

In magic, as in all else, the greatest aid to success is a complete understanding of the subject, so far as available knowledge extends. In any technical subject, such as magic, a complete understanding cannot possibly be possessed by anyone who lacks theoretical knowledge. Unless the theory—the inner constitution of a technical subject—is known, no man, however well qualified otherwise, can realize the present state of knowledge, or plan his future course with any confidence beyond that due to blissful ignorance. The theory of magic, as such things go, is comparatively simple. It is, however, none the less important on that account. Its very simplicity

renders a lack of knowledge the less excusable on the part of those who ought to possess it. And seeing how useful that knowledge becomes, when one is seeking for novel suggestions and inspirations, the magician who neglects this branch of his subject must be accounted blind to his own interests, to say no more than that.

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Contents](#)