

the double talent of juggling and extracting corns with a skill worthy of the lightness of his hands. Still, with both these qualities, he was not rich, and being aware of that fact, I hoped to obtain lessons from him at a price suited to my modest finances. In fact, for ten francs he agreed to initiate me in the juggling art.

I practiced with so much zeal, and progressed so rapidly, that in less than a month I had nothing more to learn; at least, I knew as much as my master, with the exception of corn-cutting, the monopoly in which I left him. I was able to juggle with four balls at once. But this did not satisfy my ambition; so I placed a book before me, and, while the balls were in the air, I accustomed myself to read without any hesitation.

This will probably seem to my readers very extraordinary; but I shall surprise them still more, when I say that I have just amused myself by repeating this curious experiment. Though thirty years have elapsed since the time of which I am writing, and though I scarcely once touched the balls during that period, I can still manage to read with ease while keeping three balls up.

The practice of this trick gave my fingers a remarkable degree of delicacy and certainty, while my eye was at the same time acquiring a promptitude of perception that was quite marvelous. Presently I shall have to speak of the service this rendered me in my experiment of second sight. After having thus made my hands supple and docile, I went on straight to sleight-of-hand, and I more especially devoted myself to the manipulation of cards and palmistry.

This operation requires a great deal of practice; for, while the hand is held apparently open, balls, corks, lumps of sugar, coins, etc., must be held unseen, the fingers remaining perfectly free and limber.

Owing to the little time at my disposal, the difficulties connected with these new experiments would have been insurmountable had I not found a mode of practicing without neglecting my business. It was the fashion in those days to wear coats with large pockets on the hips, called *à la*

*propriétaire*, so whenever my hands were not otherwise engaged they slipped naturally into my pockets, and set to work with cards, coins, or one of the objects I have mentioned. It will be easily understood how much time I gained by this. Thus, for instance, when out on errands my hands could be at work on both sides; at dinner, I often ate my soup with one hand while I was learning to *sauter la coupe* with the other—in short, the slightest moment of relaxation was devoted to my favorite pursuit.

## II

### "SECOND SIGHT"

A thousand more trials of patience and perseverance finally brought to the conjurer a Parisian theater and an appreciative clientele. But he never ceased to labor and improve the quality of his marvelous effects.

THE experiment, however, to which I owed my reputation was one inspired by that fantastic god to whom Pascal attributes all the discoveries of this sublunary world: it was chance that led me straight to the invention of *second sight*.

My two children were playing one day in the drawing-room at a game they had invented for their own amusement. The younger had bandaged his elder brother's eyes, and made him guess the objects he touched, and when the latter happened to guess right, they changed places. This simple game suggested to me the most complicated idea that ever crossed my mind.

Pursued by the notion, I ran and shut myself up in my workroom, and was fortunately in that happy state when the mind follows easily the combinations traced by fancy. I rested my hand in my hands, and, in my excitement, laid down the first principles of second sight.

My readers will remember the experiment suggested to me formerly by the pianist's dexterity, and the strange

faculty I succeeded in attaining: I could read while juggling with four balls. Thinking seriously of this, I fancied that this "perception by appreciation" might be susceptible of equal development, if I applied its principles to the memory and the mind.

I resolved, therefore, on making some experiments with my son Emile, and, in order to make my young assistant understand the nature of the exercise we were going to learn, I took a domino, the *cinq-quatre* for instance, and laid it before him. Instead of letting him count the points of the two numbers, I requested the boy to tell me the total at once.

"Nine," he said.

Then I added another domino, the *quarter-tray*.

"That makes sixteen," he said, without any hesitation.

I stopped the first lesson here; the next day we succeeded in counting at a single glance four dominoes, the day after six, and thus we at length were enabled to give instantaneously the product of a dozen dominoes.

This result obtained, we applied ourselves to a far more difficult task, over which we spent a month. My son and I passed rapidly before a toy-shop, or any other displaying a variety of wares, and cast an attentive glance upon it. A few steps farther on we drew paper and pencil from our pockets, and tried which could describe the greater number of objects seen in passing. I must own that my son reached a perfection far greater than mine, for he could often write down forty objects, while I could scarce reach thirty. Often feeling vexed at this defeat, I would return to the shop and verify his statement, but he rarely made a mistake.

My male readers will certainly understand the possibility of this, but they will recognize the difficulty. As for my lady readers, I am convinced beforehand they will not be of the same opinion, for they daily perform far more astounding feats. Thus, for instance, I can safely assert that a lady seeing another pass at full speed in a carriage, will have had time to analyze her toilet from her bonnet,

to her shoes, and be able to describe not only the fashion and quality of the stuffs, but also say if the lace be real or only machine-made. I have known ladies do this.

This natural, or acquired, faculty among ladies, but which my son and I had only gained by constant practice, was of great service in my performances, for while I was executing my tricks, I could see everything that passed around me, and thus prepare to foil any difficulties presented me. This exercise had given me, so to speak, the power of following two ideas simultaneously, and nothing is more favorable in conjuring than to be able to think at the same time both of what you are saying and of what you are doing. I eventually acquired such a knack in this that I frequently invented new tricks while going through my performances. One day, even, I made a bet I would solve a problem in mechanics while taking my part in conversation. We were talking of the pleasure of a country life, and I calculated during this time the quantity of wheels and pinions, as well as the necessary cogs, to produce certain revolutions required, without once failing in my reply.

This slight explanation will be sufficient to show what is the essential basis of second sight, and I will add that a secret and unnoticeable correspondence<sup>1</sup> existed between my son and myself, by which I could announce to him the name, nature, and bulk of objects handed me by spectators.

As none understood my mode of action, they were tempted to believe in something extraordinary, and, indeed, my son Emile, then aged twelve, possessed all the essential qualities to produce this opinion, for his pale, intellectual, and ever thoughtful face represented the type of a boy gifted with some supernatural power.

Two months were incessantly employed in erecting the scaffolding of our tricks, and when we were quite confident of being able to contend against the difficulties of such an undertaking, we announced the first representation of second sight. On the 12th of February, 1846, I printed in the center of my bill the following singular announcement:

"Telegraphy."

"In this performance M. Robert-Houdin's son, who is gifted with a marvelous second sight, after his eyes have been covered with a thick bandage, will designate every object presented to him by the audience."

I cannot say whether this announcement attracted any spectators, for my room was constantly crowded, still I may affirm, what may seem very extraordinary, that the experiment of second sight, which afterwards became so fashionable, produced no effect on the first performance. I am inclined to believe that the spectators fancied themselves the dupes of accomplices, but I was much annoyed by the result, as I had built on the surprise I should produce; still, having no reason to doubt its ultimate success, I was tempted to make a second trial, which turned out well.

The next evening I noticed in my room several persons who had been present on the previous night, and I felt they had come a second time to assure themselves of the reality of the experiment. It seems they were convinced, for my success was complete, and amply compensated for my former disappointment.

I especially remember a mark of singular approval with which one of my pit audience favored me. My son had named to him several objects he offered in succession; but not feeling satisfied, my incredulous friend, rising, as if to give more importance to the difficulty he was about to present, handed me an instrument peculiar to cloth merchants, and employed to count the number of threads. Acquiescing in his wish, I said to my boy, "What do I hold in my hand?"

"It is an instrument to judge the fineness of cloth, and called a thread counter."

"By Jove!" my spectator said, energetically, "it is marvelous. If I had paid ten francs to see it, I should not begrudge them."

From this moment my room was much too small, and was crowded every evening.

Still, success is not entirely rose-colored, and I could

easily narrate many disagreeable scenes produced by the reputation I had of being a sorcerer; but I will only mention one, which forms a *résumé* of all I pass over:

A young lady of elegant manners paid me a visit one day, and although her face was hidden by a thick veil, my practiced eyes perfectly distinguished her features. She was very pretty.

My incognita would not consent to sit down till she was assured we were alone, and that I was the real Robert-Houdin. I also seated myself, and assuming the attitude of a man prepared to listen, I bent slightly to my visitor, as if awaiting her pleasure to explain to me the object of her mysterious visit. To my great surprise, the young lady, whose manner betrayed extreme emotion, maintained the most profound silence, and I began to find the visit very strange, and was on the point of forcing an explanation, at any hazard, when the fair unknown timidly ventured these words:

"Good Heavens! sir, I know not how you will interpret my visit."

Here she stopped, and let her eyes sink with a very embarrassed air; then, making a violent effort, she continued:

"What I have to ask of you, sir, is very difficult to explain."

"Speak, madam, I beg," I said, politely, "and I will try to guess what you cannot explain to me."

And I began asking myself what this reserve meant.

"In the first place," the young lady said, in a low voice, and looking round her, "I must tell you confidentially that I loved, my love was returned, and I—I am betrayed."

At the last word the lady raised her head, overcame the timidity she felt, and said, in a firm and assured voice:

"Yes, sir—yes, I am betrayed, and for that reason I have come to you."

"Really, madam," I said, much surprised at this strange confession, "I do not see how I can help you in such a matter."

"Oh, sir, I entreat you," said my fair visitor, clasping her hands—"I implore you not to abandon me!"

I had great difficulty in keeping my countenance, and yet I felt an extreme curiosity to know the history concealed behind this mystery.

"Calm yourself, madam," I remarked, in a tone of tender sympathy; "tell me what you would of me, and if it be in my power——"

"If it be in your power!" the young lady said, quickly; "why, nothing is more easy, sir."

"Explain yourself, madam."

"Well, sir, I wish to be avenged."

"In what way?"

"How, you know better than I, sir; must I teach you? You have in your power means to——"

"I, madam?"

"Yes, sir, you! for you are a sorcerer, and cannot deny it."

At this word sorcerer, I was much inclined to laugh; but I was restrained by the incognita's evident emotion. Still, wishing to put an end to a scene which was growing ridiculous, I said, in a politely ironical tone:

"Unfortunately, madam, you give me a title I never possessed."

"How, sir!" the young woman exclaimed, in a quick tone, "you will not allow you are——"

"A sorcerer, madam? Oh, no, I will not."

"You will not?"

"No, a thousand times no, madam."

At these words my visitor rose hastily, muttered a few incoherent words, appeared suffering from terrible emotion, and then drawing near me with flaming eyes and passionate gestures, repeated:

"Ah, you will not! Very good; I now know what I have to do."

Stupefied by such an outbreak, I looked at her fixedly, and began to suspect the cause of her extraordinary conduct.

"There are two modes of acting," she said, with terrible volubility, "toward people who devote themselves to magic arts—entreaty and menaces. You would not yield to the first of these means, hence, I must employ the second. Stay," she added, "perhaps this will induce you to speak."

And, lifting up her cloak, she laid her hand on the hilt of a dagger passed through her girdle. At the same time she suddenly threw back her veil, and displayed features in which all the signs of rage and madness could be traced. No longer having a doubt as to the person I had to deal with, my first movement was to rise and stand on my guard; but this first feeling overcome, I repented the thought of a struggle with the unhappy woman, and determined on employing a method almost always successful with those deprived of reason. I pretended to accede to her wishes.

"If it be so, madam I yield to your request. Tell me what you require."

"I have told you, sir; I wish for vengeance, and there is only one method to——"

Here there was a fresh interruption, and the young lady, calmed by my apparent submission, as well as embarrassed by the request she had to make of me, became again timid and confused.

"Well, madam?"

"Well, sir, I know not how to tell you—how to explain to you—but I fancy there are certain means—certain spells—which render it impossible—impossible for a man to be—unfaithful."

"I now understand what you wish, madam. It is a certain magic practice employed in the middle ages. Nothing is easier, and I will satisfy you."

Decided on playing the farce to the end, I took down the largest book I could find in my library, turned over the leaves, stopped at a page which I pretended to scan with profound attention, and then addressing the lady, who followed all my movements anxiously,

"Madam," I said confidentially, "the spell I am going

to perform renders it necessary for me to know the name of the person; have the kindness, then, to tell it me."

"Julian!" she said, in a faint voice.

With all the gravity of a real sorcerer, I solemnly thrust a pin through a lighted candle, and pronounced some cabalistic words. After which, blowing out the candle, and turning to the poor creature, I said:

"Madam, it is done; your wish is accomplished."

"Oh, thank you, sir," she replied, with the expression of the profoundest gratitude; and at the same moment she laid a purse on the table and rushed away. I ordered my servant to follow her to her house, and obtain all the information he could about her, and I learned she had been a widow for a short time, and that the loss of an adored husband had disturbed her reason. The next day I visited her relatives, and, returning them the purse, I told them the scene the details of which the reader has just perused.

This scene, with some others that preceded and followed it, compelled me to take measures to guard myself against bores of every description. I could not dream, as formerly, of exiling myself in the country, but I employed a similar resource: this was to shut myself up in my workroom, and organize around me a system of defense against those whom I called, in my ill-temper, thieves of time.

I daily received visits from persons who were utter strangers to me; some were worth knowing, but the majority, gaining an introduction under the most futile pretexts, only came to kill a portion of their leisure time with me. It was necessary to distinguish the tares from the wheat, and this is the arrangement I made:

When one of these gentlemen rang at my door, an electric communication struck a bell in my workroom; I was thus warned and put on my guard. My servant opened the door, and, as is customary, inquired the visitor's name, while I, for my part, laid my ear to a tube, arranged for the purpose, which conveyed to me every word. If, according to his reply, I thought it as well not to receive him, I pressed a button, and a white mark that appeared in a

certain part of the hall announced I was not at home to him. My servant then stated I was out, and begged the visitor to apply to the manager.

Sometimes it happened that I erred in my judgment, and regretted having granted an audience; but I had another mode of shortening a bore's visit. I had placed behind the sofa on which I sat an electric spring, communicating with a bell my servant could hear. In case of need, and while talking, I threw my arm carelessly over the back of the sofa, touching the spring, and the bell rang. Then my servant, playing a little farce, opened the front door, rang the bell, which could be heard from the room where I sat, and came to tell me that M. X— (a name invented for the occasion) wished to speak to me. I ordered M. X— to be shown into an adjoining room, and it was very rare that my bore did not raise the siege. No one can form an idea how much time I gained by this happy arrangement, or how many times I blessed my imagination and the celebrated savant to whom the discovery of galvanism is due!

This feeling can be easily explained, for my time was of inestimable value. I husbanded it like a treasure, and never sacrificed it, unless the sacrifice might help me to discover new experiments destined to stimulate public curiosity.

To support my determination in making my researches, I had ever before me this maxim:

IT IS MORE DIFFICULT TO SUPPORT ADMIRATION THAN TO EXCITE IT.

And this other, an apparent corollary of the preceding:

THE FASHION AN ARTIST ENJOYS CAN ONLY LAST AS HIS TALENT DAILY INCREASES.

Nothing increases a professional man's merit so much as the possession of an independent fortune; this truth may be coarse, but it is indubitable. Not only was I convinced of these principles of high economy, but I also knew that a man must strive to profit by the fickle favor of the public, which equally descends if it does not rise. Hence I worked my reputation as much as I could. In spite of my numer-

ous engagements, I found means to give performances in all the principal theaters, though great difficulties frequently arose, as my performance did not end till half-past ten, and I could only fulfill my other engagements after that hour.

Eleven o'clock was generally the hour fixed for my appearance on a strange stage, and my readers may judge of the speed required to proceed to the theater in so short a time and make my preparations. It is true that the moments were as well counted as employed, and my curtain had hardly fallen than, rushing toward the stairs, I got before my audience, and jumped into a vehicle that bore me off at full speed.

But this fatigue was as nothing compared to the emotion occasionally produced by an error in the time that was to elapse between my two performances. I remember that, one night, having to wind up the performances at the Vaudeville, the stage manager miscalculated the time the pieces would take in performing, and found himself much in advance. He sent off an express to warn me that the curtain had fallen, and I was anxiously expected. Can my readers comprehend my wretchedness? My experiments, of which I could omit none, would occupy another quarter of an hour; but instead of indulging in useless recriminations, I resigned myself and continued my performance, though I was a prey to frightful anxiety. While speaking, I fancied I could hear that cadenced yell of the public to which the famous song, "*Des lampions, des lampions*," was set. Thus, either through preoccupation or a desire to end sooner, I found when my performance was over I had gained five minutes out of the quarter of an hour. Assuredly, it might be called the quarter of an hour's grace.

To jump into a carriage and drive to the Place de la Bourse was the affair of an instant; still, twenty minutes had elapsed since the curtain fell, and that was an enormous time. My son Emile and I proceeded up the actors' stairs at full speed, but on the first step we had heard the cries, whistling, and stamping of the impatient audience. What a prospect! I knew that frequently, either right or wrong,

the public treated an artiste, no matter whom, very harshly, to remind him of punctuality. That sovereign always appears to have on its lips the words of another monarch: "I was obliged to wait." However, we hurried up the steps leading to the stage.

The stage manager, who had been watching, on hearing our hurried steps, cried from the landing:

"Is that you, M. Houdin?"

"Yes, sir—yes."

"Raise the curtain!" the same voice shouted.

"Wait, wait, it is imp—"

My breath would not allow me to finish my objection; I fell on a chair, unable to move.

"Come, M. Houdin," the manager said, "*do* go on the stage, the curtain is up, and the public are so impatient."

The door at the back of the stage was open, but I could not pass through it; fatigue and emotion nailed me to the spot. Still, an idea occurred to me, which saved me from the popular wrath.

"Go on to the stage, my boy," I said to my son, "and prepare all that is wanting for the second-sight trick."

The public allowed themselves to be disarmed by this youth, whose face inspired a sympathizing interest; and my son, after gravely bowing to the audience, quietly made his slight preparations, that is to say, he carried an ottoman to the front of the stage, and placed on a neighboring table a slate, some chalk, a pack of cards, and a bandage.

This slight delay enabled me to recover my breath and calm my nerves, and I advanced in my turn with an attempt to assume the stereotyped smile, in which I signally failed, as I was so agitated. The audience at first remained silent, then their faces gradually unwrinkled, and soon, one or two claps having been ventured, they were carried away and peace was made. I was well rewarded, however, for this terrible ordeal, as my "second-sight" never gained a more brilliant triumph.

An incident greatly enlivened the termination of my performance.

A spectator, who had evidently come on purpose to embarrass us, had tried in vain for some minutes to baffle my son's clairvoyance, when, turning to me, he said, laying marked stress on his words:

"As your son is a soothsayer, of course he can guess the number of my stall?"

The importunate spectator doubtless hoped to force us into a confession of our impotence, for he covered his number, and the adjacent seats being occupied, it was apparently impossible to read the numbers. But I was on my guard against all surprises, and my reply was ready. Still, in order to profit as much as possible by the situation, I feigned to draw back.

"You know, sir," I said, feigning an embarrassed air, "that my son is neither sorcerer nor diviner; he reads through my eyes, and hence I have given this experiment the name of second sight. As I cannot see the number of your stall, and the seats close to you are occupied, my son cannot tell it you."

"Ah! I was certain of it," my persecutor said, in triumph, and turning to his neighbors: "I told you I would pin him."

"Oh, sir! you are not generous in your victory," I said, in my turn, in a tone of mockery. "Take care; if you pique my son's vanity too sharply, he may solve your problem, though it is so difficult."

"I defy him," said the spectator, leaning firmly against the back of his seat, to hide the number better—"yes, yes—I defy him!"

"You believe it to be difficult, then?"

"I will grant more: it is impossible."

"Well, then, sir, that is a stronger reason for us to try it. You will not be angry if we triumph in our turn?" I added, with a petulant smile.

"Come, sir; we understand evasions of that sort. I repeat it—I challenge you both."

The public found great amusement in this debate, and patiently awaited its issue.

"Emile," I said to my son, "prove to this gentleman that nothing can escape your second sight."

"It is number sixty-nine," the boy answered, immediately.

Noisy and hearty applause rose from every part of the theater, in which our opponent joined, for, confessing his defeat, he exclaimed, as he clapped his hands, "It is astounding—magnificent!"

The way I succeeded in finding out the number of the stall was this: I knew beforehand that in all theaters where the stalls are divided down the center by a passage, the uneven numbers are on the right, and the even on the left. As at the Vaudeville each row was composed of ten stalls, it followed that on the right hand the several rows must begin with one, twenty-one, forty-one, and so on, increasing by twenty each. Guided by this, I had no difficulty in discovering that my opponent was seated in number sixty-nine, representing the fifth stall in the fourth row. I had prolonged the conversation for the double purpose of giving more brilliancy to my experiment, and gaining time to make my researches. Thus I applied my process of two simultaneous thoughts, to which I have already alluded.

As I am now explaining matters, I may as well tell my readers some of the artifices that added material brilliancy to the second sight. I have already said this experiment was the result of a material communication between myself and my son which no one could detect. Its combinations enabled us to describe any conceivable object; but, though this was a splendid result, I saw that I should soon encounter unheard-of difficulties in executing it.

The experiment of second sight always formed the termination of my performance. Each evening I saw unbelievers arrive with all sorts of articles to triumph over a secret which they could not unravel. Before going to see Robert-Houdin's son a council was held, in which an object that must embarrass the father was chosen. Among these were half-effaced antique medals, minerals, books printed

in characters of every description (living and dead languages), coats-of-arms, microscopic objects, etc.

But what caused me the greatest difficulty was in finding out the contents of parcels, often tied with a string, or even sealed up. But I had managed to contend successfully against all these attempts to embarrass me. I opened boxes, purses, pocketbooks, etc., with great ease, and unnoticed, while appearing to be engaged on something quite different. Were a sealed parcel offered me, I cut a small slit in the paper with the nail of my left thumb, which I always purposely kept very long and sharp, and thus discovered what it contained. One essential condition was excellent sight, and that I possessed to perfection. I owed it originally to my old trade, and practice daily improved it. An equally indispensable necessity was to know the name of every object offered me. It was not enough to say, for instance, "It is a coin"; but my son must give its technical name, its value, the country in which it was current, and the year in which it was struck. Thus, for instance, if an English crown were handed me, my son was expected to state that it was struck in the reign of George IV, and had an intrinsic value of six francs eighteen centimes.

Aided by an excellent memory, we had managed to classify in our heads the name and value of all foreign money. We could also describe a coat-of-arms in heraldic terms. Thus, on the arms of the house of X—being handed me, my son would reply: "Field gules, with two croziers argent in pale." This knowledge was very useful to us in the *salons* of the Faubourg Saint Germain, where we were frequently summoned.

I had also learned the characters—though unable to translate a word—of an infinity of languages, such as Chinese, Russian, Turkish, Greek, Hebrew, etc. We knew, too, the names of all surgical instruments, so that a surgical pocketbook, however complicated it might be, could not embarrass us. Lastly, I had a very sufficient knowledge of mineralogy, precious stones, antiquities, and curiosities; but I had at my command every possible resource for ac-

quiring these studies, as one of my dearest and best friends, Aristide le Carpentier, a learned antiquary, and uncle of the talented composer of the same name, had, and still has, a cabinet of antique curiosities, which makes the keepers of the imperial museums fierce with envy. My son and I spent many long days in learning here names and dates, of which we afterwards made a learned display. Le Carpentier taught me many things, and, among others, he described various signs by which to recognize old coins when the die is worn off. Thus, a Trajan, a Tiberius, or a Marcus Aurelius became as familiar to me as a five-franc piece.

Owing to my old trade, I could open a watch with ease, and do it with one hand, so as to be able to read the maker's name without the public suspecting it: then I shut up the watch again and the trick was ready; my son managed the rest of the business.

But that power of memory which my son possessed in an eminent degree certainly did us the greatest service. When we went to private houses, he needed only a very rapid inspection in order to know all the objects in a room, as well as the various ornaments worn by the spectators, such as *châtelaines*, pins, eyeglasses, fans, brooches, rings, bouquets, etc. He thus could describe these objects with the greatest ease, when I pointed them out to him by our secret communication. Here is an instance:

One evening, at a house in the *Chaussée d'Antin*, and at the end of a performance which had been as successful as it was loudly applauded, I remembered that, while passing through the next room to the one we were now in, I had begged my son to cast a glance at a library and remember the titles of some of the books, as well as the order they were arranged in. No one had noticed this rapid examination.

"To end the second-sight experiment, sir," I said to the master of the house, "I will prove to you that my son can read through a wall. Will you lend me a book?"

I was naturally conducted to the library in question, which I pretended now to see for the first time, and I laid my finger on a book.



"Emile," I said to my son, "what is the name of this work?"

"It is Buffon," he replied quickly.

"And the one by its side?" an incredulous spectator hastened to ask.

"On the right or left?" my son asked.

"On the right," the speaker said, having a good reason for choosing this book, for the lettering was very small.

"The Travels of Anacharsis the Younger," the boy replied. "But," he added, "had you asked the name of the book on the left, sir, I should have said Lamartine's Poetry. A little to the right of this row, I see Crébillon's works; below, two volumes of Fleury's Memoirs"; and my son thus named a dozen books before he stopped.

The spectators had not said a word during this description, as they felt so amazed; but when the experiment had ended, all complimented us by clapping their hands.

### III

#### THE MAGICIAN WHO BECAME AN AMBASSADOR

It is not generally known that Robert-Houdin once rendered his country an important service as special envoy to Algeria. Half a century ago this colony was an endless source of trouble to France. Although the rebel Arab chieftain Abd-del-Kader had surrendered in 1847, an irregular warfare was kept up against the French authority by the native Kabyles, stimulated by their Mohammedan priests, and particularly through so-called "miracles," such as recovery from wounds and burns self-inflicted by the Marabouts and other fanatic devotees of the Prophet.

Thus in 1856 the hopes of the French Foreign Office rested on Robert-Houdin. He was requested to exhibit his tricks in the most impressive form possible, with the idea of proving to the deluded Arabs that they had been in error in ascribing supernatural powers to their holy men.

It was settled that I should reach Algiers by the next 27th of September, the day on which the great fêtes an-

nually offered by the capital of Algeria to the Arabs would commence.

I must say that I was much influenced in my determination by the knowledge that my mission to Algeria had a quasi-political character. I, a simple conjurer, was proud of being able to render my country a service.

It is known that the majority of revolts which have to be suppressed in Algeria are excited by intriguers, who say they are inspired by the Prophet, and are regarded by the Arabs as envoys of God on earth to deliver them from the oppression of the *Roumi* (Christians).

These false prophets and holy Marabouts, who are no more sorcerers than I am, and indeed even less so, still contrive to influence the fanaticism of their coreligionists by tricks as primitive as are the spectators before whom they are performed.

The government was, therefore, anxious to destroy their pernicious influence, and reckoned on me to do so. They hoped, with reason, by the aid of my experiments, to prove to the Arabs that the tricks of their Marabouts were mere child's play, and owing to their simplicity could not be done by an envoy from Heaven, which also led us very naturally to show them that we are their superiors in everything, and, as for sorcerers, there are none like the French.

Presently I will show the success obtained by these skillful tactics.

Three months were to elapse between the day of my acceptance and that of my departure, which I employed in arranging a complete arsenal of my best tricks, and left St. Gervais on the 10th of September.

I will give no account of my passage, further than to say no sooner was I at sea than I wished I had arrived, and, after thirty-six hours' navigation, I greeted the capital of our colony with indescribable delight.

On the 28th of October, the day appointed for my first performance before the Arabs, I reached my post at an early hour, and could enjoy the sight of their entrance into the theater.