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978-1-108-03240-7 - Secrets of Conjuring and Magic: Or How to Become a Wizard

Edited by Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin

Excerpt

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### THE HOME OF ROBERT-HOUDIN.



I AM at once landlord and tenant, at St. Gervais, near Blois, of a residence in which I have organised certain arrangements, I might almost say tricks, which, though scarcely so astonishing as those of my public performances, have nevertheless given me, in the country round, the repute (which in bygone days would have placed me in some danger) of possessing supernatural powers.

These mysterious arrangements are, in truth, simply ingenious applications of science to domestic purposes.

It has suggested itself to me that it might perhaps be agreeable to the public to be made acquainted with these little secrets, which have excited a good deal of interest, and I think I cannot publish them in a more appropriate way than by placing them at the head of a work whose speciality will be secrets revealed and mysteries explained.

If the reader will kindly follow me, I will conduct him to St. Gervais, introduce him into my house, and act as his guide. Indeed, to spare him all trouble and fatigue, I will, in my character of ex-magician, enable him to make his journey and pay his visit without moving from his own armchair.



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AT about a mile and a quarter from Blois, on the left bank of the Loire, is a little village whose name recalls to epicures recollections of gastronomic delights, for in that village is produced the famous “cream of St. Gervais.”

Let it not be imagined, however, that it was a weakness for this snow-white delicacy which induced me to select this spot as my home. It is solely to the “sacred love of fatherland” that I am indebted for having as my *vis-à-vis* the good town of Blois, which does me the honour to have been my birthplace.

There is a broad road, straight as a capital I, between St. Gervais and my native town. At one end of this “I” there turns to the right a parish road passing by our village, and leading to *The Priory*.

The Priory is my modest residence, which my friend Dantan the younger has promoted to the higher title of “Sell'em Abbey.”<sup>1</sup>

When the traveller reaches the Priory, he has before him :—

1. An iron gate by way of carriage entrance.
2. A door, on the left, for the admission of visitors.
3. A box, on the right, with an opening

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<sup>1</sup> “*L'Abbaye de l'Attrape*” (*la Trappe*). The pun of the original is necessarily lost in translation.—ED.

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closed by a flap, wherein to deposit letters and newspapers.

The dwelling-house stands about a quarter of a mile from this spot ; a broad but winding drive leads to it, across a little park, shaded by trees of venerable antiquity.

This short topographical description will enable the reader to appreciate the necessity of the electrical contrivances which I have arranged at the gate for the automatic discharge of the duties of porter.

The visitors' entrance is painted white. On this spotless door appears, on a level with the eye, a brass plate, gilt, bearing the name of *ROBERT-HOUDIN*. This indicator is of substantial utility, there being no neighbour near at hand to give the visitor any information.

Beneath this plate is a small knocker, also gilt, whose form sufficiently indicates its purpose ; but that there may be no doubt whatever on the subject, a little head of grotesque device, and two hands of the same character, which project from the door as from a pillory, draw attention to the word *Knock*, which is placed just beneath them.

The visitor uses the knocker, gently or forcibly at his discretion, but, however feeble be the rap, in the house, a quarter of a mile away, an energetic ringing becomes audible throughout the establishment, so arranged, however, as not to be offensive to the most delicate ear.

If the ringing ceased with the movement which caused it, as with ordinary bells, there would be nothing to secure the opening of the door, and the visitor might possibly be left cooling his heels in

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front of the Priory. But such is not the case. The bell continues to ring, and cannot be made to cease its warning sound until the lock has performed its duty in regular course.

To unlock the gate, all that is needful is to press a stud placed in the hall, and which operates somewhat after the manner of the porter's pull-cord.<sup>1</sup>

By the ceasing of the ringing, the servant knows that the stud has done its duty, and that the door is unfastened. But this is not enough. The visitor must also be informed that he can walk in.

Observe how this object is gained. At the same moment that the bolt of the lock is withdrawn, the name *ROBERT-HOUDIN* suddenly disappears, and is replaced by an enamelled plate, on which are painted, in bold characters, the words *WALK IN*.

Upon this unmistakable invitation, the visitor turns an ivory handle, and walks in, pushing open the door, which, however, he has not the trouble to close after him, this duty being performed by a spring. The door once shut, cannot be again opened without going through a regular process. All is restored to its original condition, and the name-plate has again taken the place of the invitation to enter.

The fastening arrangements have, besides, this additional element of security for the dwellers in

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<sup>1</sup> "*Le cordon du concierge.*"—French houses are frequently of great height, and inhabited by numerous families, the common entrance being placed under the care of a porter or *concierge*, who resides in a "lodge" on the ground-floor. A cord attached to the lock enables the porter to open the door without leaving his or her domestic duties for that purpose.—ED.

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the house ; if a servant, either by mistake, in fun, or through carelessness, presses the stud in the hall, the door is not unlocked, it being an indispensable preliminary that the knocker should first be lifted and the warning of the bell heard in due course.

The visitor, entering, little thinks that he has thereby conveyed certain definite information to his future entertainers. The gate, in opening and closing, has set in motion, at different angles of such opening and closing, a bell which rings in a particular manner. The peculiar and quickly ceasing sound of this bell will indicate, with a little observation, whether the visitors are one or several in number, whether the visitor is a friend of the family, or comes for the first time, or whether, lastly, the applicant for admission is some unauthorised person who, not knowing the back-door, has found his way in through this entrance.

Here I must pause to explain, for these effects, which seem to go beyond the scope of the ordinary laws of mechanics, would probably be received with disbelief by some of my readers, were I not to prove the correctness of my statements.

My arrangements for procuring information at a distance are of the greatest simplicity, and rest merely on certain indications of sound which I have never found to fail.

I have already mentioned that the door, when opened, produces at two different angles of its opening, two distinct "rings," which rings are repeated at the same angles by the act of closing. These four little tinkles, though produced by different movements, arrive at the Priory divided by intervals of silence of equal duration.

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With even so simple an arrangement it is possible, as will be seen, to receive, unknown to the visitors, intimations of very various character.

A single visitor presents himself; he rings, the door is unfastened, he walks in, pushing the door, which forthwith closes after him. This is what I call the usual opening; the four sounds have followed each other at equal intervals. Tinkle—tinkle—tinkle—tinkle. We know at the Priory that only one person has come in.

Let us suppose, in the next place, that several visitors come to see us. The door has unfastened itself in manner already explained. The first visitor opens the door and walks in, and according to the ordinary rules of politeness, he holds the door open until all the rest have passed; being then let go, the door closes. Naturally, the interval between the two first and the two last sounds of the bell has been proportionate to the number of persons who have entered; the strokes are heard thus—tinkle—tinkle—tinkle—tinkle! and to a practised ear the estimation of the number offers no difficulty whatever.

The regular “friend of the family” is easily recognised. He knocks, and knowing exactly what will take place, he does not stop to examine the little eccentricities of the gate; the door is no sooner unfastened than the four equidistant sounds of the bell are heard, and announce that he has entered.

With a new visitor there is a difference. He

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knocks—when the words *WALK IN* appear, he stops short in surprise, and it is only after the lapse of a few moments that he makes up his mind to open the door. In so doing, he takes notice of everything; his advance is slow, and the four sounds of the bell are slow in proportion. Tinkle———tinkle———tinkle———tinkle. We make ready at the Priory to receive an unaccustomed guest.

The begging tramp, who comes to this door because he does not know the kitchen entrance, timidly raises the knocker, and instead of seeing any one come, in the regular way, to open the door, he finds a manner of opening which he little expects. He fears to get into a scrape, he hesitates about coming in, and if he does so, it is only after some moments of waiting and uncertainty. It may be well imagined that he does not abruptly open the door. Hearing the bell t-i-n-k-l-e———t-i-n-k-l-e———t-i-n k-l-e———t-i-n-k-l-e—the people in the house can almost fancy they see the poor devil creep in. We go to meet him knowing exactly the kind of person to expect. Indeed, we have never found ourselves mistaken.

Let us next suppose that “carriage” friends come to pay us a visit. The carriage-gates are ordinarily closed but the coachmen of the neighbourhood all know, either by experience or by hearsay, how they are opened. The driver gets down from his seat; he first gets the side-door opened, and he walks in. This, by the way, is a gentleman whose “ring” is characteristic — Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle, tinkle! We

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quite understand at the Priory that the coachman who enters with such despatch desires to gain credit with his master or his fare for his activity and intelligence.

Our friend finds hung inside the key of the large gate, to which a written notice draws his attention ; it only remains for him to open the folding gates, whose double movement is seen and heard, even inside the house. With this object, there is placed in the hall a tablet on which are painted the words *THE CARRIAGE-GATES ARE* ——. At the end of this incomplete inscription follow alternatively the words *OPEN* and *SHUT*, according as the gates are in the one or the other of these conditions ; their alternative transposition forming a practical illustration of the truth of the saying, “A door must either be open or shut.”<sup>1</sup>

By the aid of such tablet I can make certain every evening, without personal inspection, that the gates are properly closed.

Let us now pass on to the arrangements of the letter-box. Again, nothing can be more simple. I have already stated that the letter-box is closed by a small flap. This flap is so arranged that, whenever it is opened, it sets in motion at the Priory an electric bell. Now the postman has orders to put in first, and all together, all newspapers and circulars, so as not to create unfounded expectations, after which he puts in the letters, one by one. We are therefore notified in the house of the delivery

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<sup>1</sup> “*Il faut qu’une porte soit ouverte ou fermée.*”—French Proverb.



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of each article, so that if we are not inclined for early rising, we may, even in bed, reckon up the different items of the morning post-bag.

To save the trouble of carrying our letters to the village post-office, we write all our correspondence of an evening ; then, by turning an apparatus called a *commutator*, the working of the signals is reversed ; and the next morning the postman, on putting his parcel in the box, instead of causing a ringing in the house, is warned by the sound of a bell close beside him to come up to the house and fetch some letters, and he announces himself accordingly.

These contrivances, useful as they are, have one drawback which I ought to mention, and à propos of which I have an amusing little story which, while we are on the subject, I will relate for the reader's benefit.

The inhabitants of St. Gervais have a virtue to which I am very happy to testify ; they are by no means inquisitive. Not one of them has ever taken it into his head to touch the knocker at my gate without just cause. But strangers from the town (Blois) are not always so discreet, and occasionally take the liberty of trying experiments with my electrical arrangements, in order to see their mode of operation. Though by no means frequent, these acts of inquisitiveness are none the less unpleasant. This is the drawback to which I have referred, and the following is the incident to which it gave rise.

One day, John, our gardener, is at work near the entrance-gate ; he hears a noise in that direction, and observes an idler from our good town of Blois,

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who, after having used the knocker, is amusing himself by opening and shutting the door, regardless of the commotion he is creating within the house. Upon the gardener remonstrating with him, the intruder simply says, by way of apology—

“Ah! yes, I know. It rings *over there*. Excuse me, I merely wished to see how it worked.”

“Oh, if that is the case,” says the gardener, in a tone of assumed good-nature, “of course that alters the matter. I appreciate your desire for information, and I apologise for having interfered with your investigations.”

Thereupon, without appearing to observe the other's confusion, John goes back to his work, keeping up the assumption of complete indifference. But our John has a touch of renegefulness about him, and is a sly dog in the bargain. He is by no means appeased, and though he dissembles his annoyance, it is merely in order to give his mind full play in arranging a plan of reprisals which he has conceived, and which he intends, without delay, to put into execution.

Towards midnight he betakes himself to the house of the gentleman in question, lays hold of the bell, and rings with all his force.

A window is partly opened on the first-floor, and through the opening a head appears, adorned with a nightcap, and scarlet with indignation.

John has provided himself with a lantern, and turns its light full on to his victim.

“Good evening, sir,” he says, with ironical politeness, “how do you do?”

“What the devil are you ringing for at this hour of the night?” the head replies, in wrathful accents.