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THE PATTERN OF THE MAGICIAN

BY

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NEW YORK

THE SOCIETY OF AMERICAN MAGICIANS

1906

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Bequest of
Harry Houdini
April 1927

879/1/22

THE PATTTER OF THE MAGICIAN

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NEW YORK

Treasurer of The Society of American Magicians

When I consider all that has been written on patter, and that I myself wrote all that I knew on the subject for Mahatma a few years ago, even then disclaiming all originality on the subject, I can hardly stand before a company of magicians and present a paper on this topic with the expectation of winning applause, unless it be for an exhibition of that cardinal virtue so necessary in our profession: an iron nerve.

The word "patter" has come down to us from the time when to be called a conjurer was little better than to be called a thief, and was probably borrowed from the patter-flash, so called, which was the jargon used by thieves in order to converse among themselves without fear of betraying their secrets to outsiders.

The conjurers also had secrets to conceal, and for that reason adopted a patter of their own, by the use of which they, like their contemporaries, the thieves, and unlike many of their modern prototypes, were enabled to keep those secrets "mum from the outer world."

In later times, when the profession had risen to higher planes and conjuring had become a polite science, the patter of the ancient brethren was abandoned, but the word itself was, seemingly, too good to lose, so it was shifted to the position it now holds as the technical name of the story which is supposed to accompany each trick in order to give it an appearance of reality. It was

Paper read before The Society of American Magicians at the Regular Meeting, Saturday, January 7th, 1905.

Voltaire, the French freethinker, who said: "Speech was given to man to conceal his thoughts"; and it was the French school of conjurers that first reduced patter, or, as they named it, Boniment, to a fine art which not only concealed thoughts, but concealed actions as well. Among these, probably the one most successful in making patter an important and useful part of his programme, was the original Comte, and I will quote a story from Burlingame's "Leaves from a Conjurer's Scrapbook," showing the cleverness of this artist: "A Frenchman from head to foot, he did extraordinary things with rare taste and great amiability. All his illusions meant for a small audience carry the impress of finest humor. For instance, he assures you he is going to steal all the ladies present; the gentlemen are scared and amused. Comte reassures them with the promise that he will do it to their satisfaction. He waves his hands in the air and produces a quantity of the most beautiful roses out of nothing. He continues: 'I had promised to take away and metamorphose all these ladies; could I choose a more graceful and pleasant form? In metamorphosing all to roses, don't I offer the copy to the model? Don't I take away to give you back to yourselves? Tell me, gentlemen, did I not succeed?' Then he begins to divide the roses among the audience. 'Here, mademoiselle, is a rose you made blush with jealousy!' Before another pretty girl he changes a rose to an ace of hearts, and the wizard says: 'Will you please, madam, lay your hand on your heart? You have only one heart, is it not so? I beg your pardon for this indiscreet question; it was necessary; for, though you have only one heart, you might have them all!' Such plays on words are told about Comte by the hundred."

Following Comte came Robert Houdin, that name dear to the heart of every true magician. As an example of the wonderful possibilities of patter, we need only recall his famous "Light and Heavy Chest," a story too familiar to need repetition in a company like this present.

A little later came that most delightful of modern magicians, Robert Heller, a man who might be called bungler if merely the physical part of his work were considered, but whose charming personality and clever use of patter made his performances the delight of the very best people of the communities he visited. Heller was the first famous magician I ever saw, and, while I have seen many who were vastly more skillful with their hands, and many others who had a better outfit of both tricks and apparatus, I have yet to see the magician who can approach him as an entertainer.

It is not the object of this paper to give a lesson in patter, but I cannot refrain from saying a few words along this line, for, although nearly every book ever written on the subject of magic has been emphatic in its statement of the immense importance of patter, still how few of the magicians of our day seem to realize the fact; how few seem to know what patter really is. Here are men like Thurston, Golden, Soto Sumetaro, and many others who have silent acts. Have these men any use for patter? Nine men out of ten will answer: "No." I say: "Yes." Patter is the story of a trick, and be that story spoken or acted, so long as it clearly conveys the impression, it is patter.

We are all agreed that, in the last analysis, patter is a fabric of lies. Now, according to the Standard Dictionary, which I believe is now considered the best authority, "A lie is the uttering or acting of that which is false, for the purpose of misleading." Now I think it would be hard to find a combination of words that would approximate a better definition of patter as applied to its use in magic.

In regard to silent acts, although they are sometimes successful, and are particularly good for the performers who visit foreign countries where the language is unknown to them, still I am strongly in favor of speaking acts for many reasons. In the first place, a fairly good magician can hold an audience for an hour without

much trouble, while it takes a veritable artist to make a silent act run more than twenty minutes, and, as a general thing, more tricks are used in the twenty minutes than in the hour. But if a performer is not a good talker and is fairly good at pantomime, there is still a chance for him in the magic circle.

The magician plays a part the same as an actor, and, as the most successful actors have plays written to fit their personal capabilities, so the magician should have patter so arranged that his good points are emphasized while his faults are kept as far in the background as possible. In this connection allow me to quote a few lines from an article which I wrote for *Mahatma* some seven years ago:

"Some performers do not use the same patter on all occasions, but change it to suit the circumstances under which they work, depending largely on the impulse of the moment, and I must confess to a tendency in that direction myself; nevertheless, I am satisfied that it is not the best method and that it is far safer to write out and commit to memory the patter for each trick and never to change it any more than an actor would change the lines of Hamlet.

"In the case of the actor there are only the lines to remember, as the lines suggest the action, but with a magician it is very different, for he is continually doing one thing and saying another, therefore, the former should be so dead-letter perfect that he can rattle off his patter without giving it a thought. Hence he should never have his patter written by another, but should write it himself, and then it will be in his own style, employing his own vocabulary and, therefore, will be easy and natural, and not have the appearance of having been learned by rote. He should be extremely careful that the grammar is not defective, as bad grammar is never excusable in a public performer, and many a man whose work is first-class in other respects is working seven or

eight times a day in a dime museum because of his inability to use the King's English properly."

Now, I have only one suggestion to add to this, and that is for the magician who has not had the advantage of a liberal education—to him I still say: "Write your own patter, but have it corrected by some well-educated person."

As to the importance of good patter, I think that you can recall any number of magicians who, while only fairly efficient in sleight-of-hand, have been conspicuously successful owing to the cleverness with which their acts were presented, while on the other hand the sands of time are strewn with the wrecks of those who possessed most remarkable dexterity, but lacked the art of presenting their work in a manner acceptable to the public. The difference between these two classes is the difference between the artist and the mechanic; the place for the mechanic is the shop, only the artist can succeed in the glare of the footlights.

I will cite a couple of personal experiences where patter rendered certain tricks convincing and successful which otherwise—in my hands at least—would have fallen rather flat. The first was in the Thimble Trick which our Ill. Bro. Leipsiger has made so popular. In the summer of 1896 I was at the store of Ill. Bro. LeRoy, in Boston, looking for pocket tricks, and among others he showed me a crude form of the Thimble Trick which consisted of two thimbles, one being small enough to be concealed inside the other so that the appearance was that of a single thimble, and the trick consisted in passing it from the index finger of the right hand to the same finger of the left and back again. I used the trick a few times and then discarded it, as I could not get much of an effect out of it. The following year somebody showed me a few passes with a single thimble, and by combining these with the old trick I worked up quite a respectable combination, but I still used it as a pocket trick, not considering it good enough to be put in my programme. In February, 1898,

I had an engagement at the Harlem Presbyterian Church, afternoon and evening, and in the evening I wished to give a change of programme, but as I did not have much stuff with me, and something got broken in transit, I decided to try the thimble on them, but there was so little of it that it would not fill much time. However, I started in and told a rambling story about a visit to my grandmother years before, finally working around to the introduction of a thimble that could not be lost. Then I worked in the passes to prove that it made no difference where it was put, for it immediately disappeared and was actually nowhere at all until it was needed again, and then wherever you looked for it there it was to be found. I used up four or five minutes in the introductory story before the thimble was shown, while the trick itself occupied only about three minutes, but together they made a reasonably long trick, and, what is still better, it made a hit.

Another society connected with the same church was to have an entertainment in the same place a week later, and they engaged me for that also. I did not include the thimble trick in the latter programme, but when I responded to an encore, made my little bow, and was walking off, the dominie arose and asked me if I would not repeat the thimble trick that I had given the week before. Of course I consented, and thus "the stone that the builders refused became the headstone of the corner," and all through a little well-chosen patter.

I recall another incident which illustrates the value of patter, this time in connection with the Cone, or Skittle, Trick, so-called. The first time I worked this trick I had my wife in the audience, as I often did, to pick out the weak spot in a new trick, and her criticism was that the cone was such an odd shaped thing, and was so evidently made especially for the trick, that the audience was not so much surprised at its evanishment and reappearance as they would have been in the case of a more ordinary article. Take, for instance, an egg. Now, the minute

an egg is shown the audience knows that it is natural for it to do one of three things: either by the slow process of incubation it should produce a chicken, or by the quicker process of the cook it should be prepared to tickle the palate of the human animal, or, after a prolonged existence among the haunts of men, in its ripe old age it should act as a medium of communication between the over-wrought audience and the under-wrought actor; but when the egg, instead of fulfilling its manifest destiny in any of the above ways, proceeds to vanish and reappear at the will of the magician, to pass invisibly in and out of seemingly solid boxes or bags, or to multiply indefinitely in the dental orifice of a colored assistant, then the audience is treated to the double surprise produced by the egg having done those things which it ought not to have done, and left undone those things which it ought to have done. Now in the case of the cone, it was evident that some means must be devised to place it on the same terms as the egg in the minds of the audience, and in order to do this I introduced patter about as follows: "To those of you who never have been in India this may appear to be a rather strange and useless article. It is not a ten-pin nor a skittle, and yet it is used by the natives in India in a game which slightly resembles bowling, and which is called Tisali, and this strange looking object is called a Tisa, sixteen of them being used in a game. Instead of bowling at them with a ball, they use a sort of boomerang, made of an elephant's tusk, which they call a Biggerli. This is thrown in such a way that it returns and strikes the pins from the back, tumbling them over much the same as in our bowling game." It is surprising to see how much this little speech improves the trick. It is always listened to seriously, and I remember one case where a man came to me after the show and asked further particulars about the game.

If a performer will study his audience carefully, he will get many hints from them by which he can strengthen his trick. I remember on one occasion I was doing

"money catching," and in those days I always used real half dollars for coin tricks. While passing through the audience and picking coins from various places I happened to shake the hat a little too violently, and a coin jumped out and rolled along the floor. Of course I did not care to lose it, so I chased it up, and while doing so I heard a voice say: "I wonder why he is so anxious about a single coin when he can pick them out of the air in handfuls?" This gave me a pointer, and from that time I always used palming coins, so that in case one was dropped it helped rather than injured the trick, for in case anyone looked for it I could say: "Oh, never mind that; see, the air is full of them." And to prove it I would produce a handful. I found also that the coin always got back to me, for somebody was sure to pick it up, and, when I passed again, throw it into the hat.

I could go on in this strain for a long time giving personal reminiscences, but these will suffice for the present, I think. By this time you must be convinced that I am a most ardent believer in the saving grace of a good patter plot, and my first question to all beginners who seek my advice in regard to magic is: "Can you tell a good story?" For if a man can hold an audience for twenty minutes by means of his talent for telling stories, I will guarantee to make a fairly good magician of him in a surprisingly short space of time. Of course the programme of such a performer would contain very little sleight-of-hand, but it would contain a whole lot of entertainment, and it is for this that the dear public is willing to pay its good money.

Remember, please, we are discussing patter, and naturally it occupies the entire foreground for the present, to the exclusion of all else, but I hope you will not fall into the error of supposing that I think that patter is the only essential to success in our profession, and that skill is a very poor second. On the contrary, I consider skill to be the first great requisite to lasting success, but to succeed on skill alone would require a degree of perfec-

tion far beyond the grasp of ordinary mortals. Now I may not have said much that is new, much that is witty, or much that is profound, but I have said a lot that is true, and, it seems to me, not entirely untimely, and my only hope is that it may provoke further discussion along this line, and that wiser heads than mine may add their tribute to the glory of good old patter.

