

## *Ex Libris* by Joaquin Ayala, PhD.

Hello folks and welcome to the Ex Libris article for June of 2016! **This article is dedicated to the memory of our dear friend, Bob Waite (1931-2016).** This month I thought we would take a trip of another sort, a trip back in time, all the way to 1868. This month we will focus on **Les Secrets de la Prestidigitation et de la Magie** by Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, written of course in French and published by Michel Lévy Frères. In 1878 Professor Hoffmann translated it into English as **The Secrets of Conjuring and Magic** and it was published by George Routledge & Sons out of England, which still exists today as the Routledge publishing house.

This book has a lot of material in its 412 pages and it begins with a description of his home in Blois, France and its contents. Robert-Houdin was a watchmaker by trade so it was quite the mechanical marvel and still stands today as a museum. It included mealtime alarms for both yourself and your horses, which included a way to feed them the proper amount of corn, a method of detecting visitors from a distance and who they were (their character), synchronized clocks around the home, a thief-catcher (trap) and an Aerial Railway.

The conjuring section of the book begins with a bit of history behind the cups and balls, its progenitors and conjuring “dignitaries” of the day who first visited Paris. It goes on to describe the various genres of magic including Natural Magic (think Magick, with a “k”), mentalism, pseudo-mesmerism, psychic work (mediums, etc.) and parlour magic.

He not only tells you what you should and should not do during your performances, but also, why. Many beginner books do not even cover this, and he also describes something that is central to all sleight of hand performers: your *hands*. He includes a diagram of its various parts and their respective roles in sleight of hand, which is followed quite appropriately with a section on magic with coins. He covers various ways to hide (palm) coins, vanish them and produce them, including using sleeves and cravats, how to switch coins, using a wand, a table, pockets, etc. It is a very thorough section on coin work, much of which is still in use today. One of the standout effects with coins included here is *The Shower of Money*, which is similar to the modern effect, *Free and Unlimited Coinage of Silver* in which coins are produced from various objects, and of course the ever classic *Magical Filtration of Five Francs* which Dai Vernon made very popular and which also appeared in the Bobo book on coins under the title of *Copper/Silver Extraction*.

The next section deals with card magic and various methods of false shuffles are explained, as well as a version of the Classic Pass, forcing, palming, peeking a selection and a section on special sleights including one that is akin to the Glide, instruction on marked cards and even oversize cards (a card that is slightly wider or slightly longer than the deck it is in). These days among the youth of magic, flourishes and cardistry are a big hit. Many people are surprised to find out that this book also has a section on flourishes with cards – nothing as advanced as some of the finger-flinging, knuckle-busting stuff seen today, but it was an admirable skill back in 1868. These included things like springing the cards, a one-handed Pass, a one-handed change of a card (later dubbed the *Master Move* by Harry Lorrayne), card throwing (a la Ricky Jay) and even a technique for a deck switch! Also given are a number of his signature effects with cards, one being *The Ladies’ Looking Glass* (a multiple selection effect) and his *Protean Pack* in which the deck changes three times to match three different selections. Another effect described was an early version of Card to Wallet, which is still very popular today and with good reason!

The next section focuses on magic with other items, mainly small ones such as corks, sugar cubes, balls, etc. He describes the procedure for palming these objects and various ways to vanish them in the hands or on a table as you pick them up, set them down, roll them (balls especially), throwing it into the air, etc. A description is given for a magic table which is used as an aid in vanishing the objects as well. There is a section on crystal ball manipulation as well as the classic Chinese Linking Rings, but most of the material on the rings focuses on “passes” with the rings: counting and short sequences with varying numbers of rings. Robert-Houdin describes an effect which is, to my mind, the predecessor of the modern Bowling Ball Production: Producing a Canon Ball from a Hat. He discusses how to properly load the ball and to produce it with maximum effect. There is even an effect where you change a pack of cards into a bird!

The next section delves into the methodology of the Cups & Balls, the materials necessary to perform the effect, the principles at play (“misdirection”, etc.), including the various means and ways of producing and vanishing the balls, how to handle them, how to handle the cups and even a vocabulary section. Included here is a reference to the performance of the effect in the “old style”, instruction for which is provided in the form of the routine used by the Italian magician Bartolomeo Bosco and is only contemporary, the French magician, Conus (famous for the Conus Aces effect).

The final section deals with various sundry effects, including the *Birth of Flowers* (a.k.a. *The Magical Vegetation*), the production of bowls full of gold fish and the Marvellous Equilibrium.

This book is now a classic tome filled with material that has stood the test of time; many modern effects can be recognized in the pages of this book. Robert-Houdin also created a number of effects for which he became famous, including his *Blooming Orange Tree* and the *Light and Heavy Chest*, which bears its own fascinating history.

That is all for this month folks. Enjoy the start to summer and make the most of it – get out there and share the magic with others and have fun!

-JMA