Chapter 1

THE TWO MAGICS

The art of conjuring consists in creating illusions of the impossible.

In 1856, French North Africa was as disturbed as it is today. However, the agitators were not Communists but marabouts—Mohammedan fanatics who worked the Arabian mobs into superstitious frenzy by pretending to possess magical powers.

The French Government displayed imagination almost unique in official circles and sent a conjurer, Robert-Houdin, to discredit the marabouts by outdoing their magic.

One of Robert-Houdin's feats is probably the most perfect example of conjuring ever performed. The marabouts had a trick which apparently proved that no pistol aimed at them would fire. The French conjurer countered by letting a marabout shoot at him and catching the bullet in an apple stuck on the point of a knife. However, Robert-Houdin had announced publicly that his "magic" consisted entirely of tricks, and the shrewder marabouts guessed that his bullet-catching feat could be performed only with his own gun.

Some time later, while the Frenchman was stopping in a native village, a marabout drew two pistols from his burnoose and challenged Robert-Houdin to a duel in which the marabout claimed the right to the first shot! Robert-Houdin protested but finally agreed to fight the duel under the marabout's conditions at eight o'clock the following morning.

The meeting took place in an open square surrounded by whitewashed buildings. The square was packed with Arabs who hoped to see the Frenchman killed. The marabout produced his pistols which he loaded with powder. He offered Robert-Houdin a handful of bullets. The Frenchman chose two, dropped them into the weapons, covered them with paper wads, and thrust them into the barrels with a ramrod.

The marabout had watched every step and felt sure that his adversary could not escape. He took careful aim and pulled the trigger. Robert-Houdin smiled—and displayed the bullet between his teeth.

The marabout tried to seize the other pistol, but the French conjurer held him off, saying, "You could not injure me, but you shall see that my skill is more dangerous than yours. Watch!"

He fired at the nearest wall. Whitewash flew. Where the bullet had struck, a gout of blood appeared and dripped down the masonry.

The art of illusion is at least 95 per cent applied psychology. In the duel with the marabout, psychology accounted for 98 per cent of the effect. The underlying trick was simple. If it had been used alone, it might have puzzled the Arabs, but the dramatic impact would have been lost.

In those days, duelling pistols were provided with bullet molds. Robert-Houdin cast two hollow balls of wax which he rubbed with graphite to make them look like lead. One ball was left empty; the other was filled with blood drawn from his thumb. He *switched* these for the real bullets by sleight of hand. The empty ball went into the marabout's gun and was rammed home with enough force to break the wax into small bits. The blood-filled bullet in the conjurer's pistol was merely pushed into the barrel. It was strong enough to hold together until it struck the wall and splashed it with blood.

Robert-Houdin was able to overcome the Arabs because he followed the formula adopted by the most successful wonder-workers down the ages. Witch doctors, pagan priests, spiritualist mediums, and confidence men have impressed their dupes by making the least possible use of trickery and applying all the psychology they could muster. Modern conjurers can profit from following the same rules. When they use more than one part of trickery to nine parts of psychology, they cannot hope to create the maximum impression.

Drama as Magic

Drama, like conjuring, is an art of illusion. A play does not take place on the stage but in the minds of the spectators. What really happens is that a troupe of actors repeats a carefully rehearsed routine before an obviously artificial setting. The audience, however, misinterprets this as a series of exciting events in the lives of the characters.

Forcing spectators to interpret what they see and hear in ways which they know are false comes as close to genuine magic as we are likely to get. The everyday illusions of the legitimate stage put all but the best conjuring performances to shame. Even a second-rate play convinces spectators of "facts" which they know are not true. It can go further and use these imaginary "facts" to wring real tears from the eyes of the audience. Everyone is aware that a leading lady on Broadway receives a salary which puts her in the upper tax brackets. Nevertheless, this knowledge does not keep audiences from sobbing over her poverty when she impersonates a homeless waif.

The magic of drama is infinitely more powerful than the magic of trickery. It is as available to the conjurer as it is to the actor. The only difference is that actors take it for granted, whereas few conjurers are even aware that it exists.

You need not accept this on my testimony. Here is evidence from Harlan Tarbell, one of the greatest conjurers of the twentieth century:

> What magical showmanship can do was brought home to me forcibly when a party of twelve magicians, including myself, went to see the play *The Charlatan* in which Frederick Tilden was playing the leading role of Cagliostro, the magician. We sat delighted at the magic and illusions that he presented from time to time in the play. When he produced a rosebush from a seed which he planted into a bit of sand in a clear glass flower-pot, we were completely mystified. Here, truly, was a great magician whom we had hitherto missed. After the show, we went back stage, met Tilden and invited him out to dinner. . . .
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> As is customary at dinners, some of the boys performed a few miracles. This was no exception. When Tilden was called on to perform, he said, "Why, boys, I'm no magician. I do not do tricks. You have me all wrong. I am just an actor."
>
> "Oh, no," said we, "You are a magician. Didn't we see the wonderful magic you performed in the theater this afternoon? . . ."
>
> He leaned back and laughed. "Do you mean to say those simple tricks fooled you?"
>
> Then Tilden gave us an excellent talk. He said that when he was chosen to play the part of a noted magician, Cagliostro, he determined to make himself feel like a great magician and act the part. He studied what he thought a man like Cagliostro would do and what he would say in the emergencies which the play brought forth. . . .
>
> He decided that things could be produced and vanished from places which an audience would least suspect. In this instance, the man who appeared most innocent of helping him was the villain, a lawyer who tried to expose Cagliostro and prove him to be a faker. So Tilden thought his best helper would be this disturbing lawyer, a skeptic who sought every way possible to undo the magician. In the eyes of the audience, this lawyer and the magician were bitter enemies. In reality, it was the lawyer who helped create the illusions. When the lawyer lifted up the paper cone from the flower-pot to see that there was no trickery, he put the flowers into the cone himself in readiness for the production a moment later. And Tilden, in his mastery of showmanship, put his effects over as though he were the greatest magician in the world.

The bullet-catching routine provides another example. As far as the trickery was concerned, Robert-Houdin's feat was merely another version of stage effect that was old even in his day. But from the standpoint of the audience, there was no

comparison. The stage performers challenged their audiences to discover how the gun was *faked* so that no bullet came out of the muzzle. Sometimes the device actually lay elsewhere. However, as that possibility did not occur to the spectators, it could not affect their reactions. The Arabs in Robert-Houdin's audience, on the other hand, did not think of him as doing a trick. From their viewpoint, he was staking his life in a duel for the control of North Africa—a duel in which only the power of his magic could protect him from certain death!

Actually, the stage versions are extremely dangerous. At least ten performers have been killed by them, and there have been twice as many nonfatal accidents. But most theatergoers do not know that and would not believe it if they were told. Hence, the men who have presented the trick on stage were taking a tremendous risk without making a corresponding impression on their audiences. This illustrates a basic principle. *What occurs on the stage is of no consequence except as it affects the thinking of the spectators.* All that matters is what they think and see and hear.

Tricks vs. Illusions

Stage bullet-catching is a trick. It makes the audience wonder how it is done, but it does not persuade anyone, even momentarily, that the performer's magic renders him invulnerable to rifle fire. Robert-Houdin, on the other hand, created an illusion. He persuaded his audience that no bullet could harm him.

Unfortunately, conjurers have formed the habit of referring to any large trick as an "illusion." The term is used as a description of size. If the equipment is big enough, the trick is called an "illusion" even though a ten-year-old child can see through it. This careless use of language is likely to confuse our thinking. We shall not follow the custom. Instead, we shall call anything a "trick" which challenges its audience to discover how it was worked. We shall reserve *illusion* for those feats which actually convince the audience. In most cases, the conviction will be neither deeper nor more lasting than the conviction of an audience at *Hamlet* that the prince has been killed in a duel. However, this is all the theater needs to create drama—and it is all a conjurer needs to fascinate his audience instead of being content to provide a little amusement.

There is a tremendous difference between even such short-lived illusions and none at all. If a play fails to create any illusion, it is worthless. On the other hand, if it succeeds in creating an illusion, the fact that the spell of the drama is broken with the fall of the curtain does not diminish its effect in the slightest.

Fortunately for conjurers, a routine that fails to create an illusion is better than an unconvincing performance of a play. It may still be highly entertaining as a trick. Nevertheless, as illusions have far more appeal to most audiences, there is no reason why we should not gratify them and ourselves by providing the additional interest.

The difference between a trick and an illusion depends largely on the conjurer's attitude. Illusions take many different forms. But, in the most typical examples, the performer claims some specific, supernormal power and makes this claim as impressively as possible. He then indicates that the purpose of his performance is to demonstrate the power. He provides this demonstration, and it appears to prove his claim.

The conjurer who presents a trick usually begins by admitting that it is a trick. On the rare occasions when he pretends to have some remarkable power, he does it half-heartedly as though to say, "We all know that this is pure hokum, and that I only talk about magic, telepathy, or what not because it is part of the act." Such an attitude cannot create an illusion. If one actor in a play treated his part in this fashion, the play would fail. Furthermore, even when the man who performs a trick does claim a power, he usually leaves it vague; the trick is not treated as a demonstration of the power, and the *effect* does not prove the claim. He cannot expect to create an illusion, because neither he nor his audience knows what illusion he is trying to create.

The Magic of Meaning

No matter how astonishing a trick may be, it suffers from one major fault—it has no point. Suppose you could work miracles. Suppose that, without coming near me, you simply gestured toward my pocket and told me to put my hand in it. I did so and took out a ham sandwich. This would no doubt amaze me, but after I had recovered from my surprise my only feeling would be, "So what?"

But suppose I say, "I'm hungry," and you reply, "I can fix that. Look in your left coat pocket." When I do so, I find a sandwich. This has a point. It makes sense. You cannot work that sort of miracle, but you can add meaning to your conjuring.

Even the celebrated classics of conjuring have no point. The spectator may say, "Marvelous." However, he then shrugs his shoulders and adds mentally, "But what of it?" This is why many people find tricks dull. They feel that any form of entertainment should have meaning. When they can find none in a trick, they yawn.

Consider the well-known *Four Ace Trick* for example. The Aces are dealt on a table. Three *indifferent* cards are placed on each Ace. A pile is chosen by a spectator. When it is turned over, it is found to contain all four Aces and the other piles are shown to consist of indifferent cards. The audience may be amazed, but the trick makes little impression because it has no significance. If you could perform real magic, even very minor magic, would you waste it on an effect like that?

An illusion is entirely different. The fact that the performer claims a supernormal power, and proposes to demonstrate it, arouses attention. It gives the spectators a definite idea on which to focus: *Can this man substantiate his incredible claim?* The mental attitude of the audience watching an illusion is far removed from that of one watching a mere trick.

Interest depends entirely on meaning. The degree of interest that spectators take in any performance is in direct proportion to its meaning for them. The more meaning you can pack into a presentation, the more interest it will excite. An illusion creates interest because the conjurer gives it meaning by proposing to demonstrate some remarkable power. A typical trick has no meaning beyond the fact that it presents a puzzle and challenges the audience to find a solution.

Many people find puzzles dull. Even the enthusiast is bored by some types of puzzles. Conjuring puzzles are not likely to fascinate anyone who is not a conjuring-puzzle addict.

Conjuring puzzles have a special weakness. When a spectator meets the challenge by solving the puzzle, the conjurer loses. When the spectator fails, he regards the conjuring puzzle like any other puzzle; he gives up and feels entitled to be told the answer. This places the performer in an insolvable dilemma.

If he refuses to divulge his secret, the spectators feel frustrated and resentful; if the conjurer yields, the explanation seems so trivial that they feel let down.

When we supply a meaning, we eliminate the challenge, and the puzzle becomes secondary. After the climax, the spectator may wonder how it was achieved. But even then, the puzzle element is greatly weakened. In fact, if the meaning is made strong enough, many spectators may not realize that there is any puzzle to solve. With a competent performance and a not-too-skeptical audience, the following illusion will be accepted as a genuine demonstration of telepathy.

DIAL INFORMATION

Start a conversation on the subject of extrasensory perception. Try to have each spectator express his views. This arouses interest in the subject before you even suggest your intention of exhibiting any supernormal phenomenon.

Remark that a friend of yours claims to be telepathic. You have seen him do some remarkable things with ESP cards, but you suspect he is a fake. Your friend claims that distance is no barrier, and that he can read minds ten miles away as easily as those in the same room. In fact, he says people call him up on the phone and ask him to read their minds as a stunt. This happened so often that he had to get an unlisted number. However, he let you have his number and promised to give you one demonstration of his powers. This seems as good a time as any to take him up on his offer.

As you have no ESP cards, you will have to use something else. Why not coins? Take a handful of change from your pocket and have someone choose a coin. Let us suppose that he chooses a quarter.

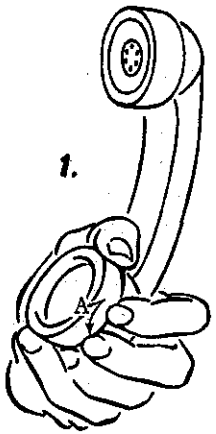
Your telepathic friend has given you a card bearing his unlisted number. Read this to yourself to refresh your memory, but before you dial say to a second spectator, "After I get him, you do the talking. My friend lives alone, so he's the only one who can answer and you won't have to call for him by name. Just tell him I said he can read your mind, and ask him if he knows what you're thinking about. Don't say it's a coin."

Dial the number and wait until the telepath answers. Do not speak yourself; simply hand the telephone to the person who is to do the talking.

When the telepath is asked to read the speaker's mind, he replies that the group must all think of the same thing. After a pause, he announces that the object is round and metallic, probably a coin. He then adds, "Tell Joe (you, the conjurer) that he's in this too. If he'll get his mind off the blonde in the red dress and focus it on the coin, I may be able to give the demonstration." As there actually is a blonde in a red dress and you have been eyeing her during the test, this comes as a shock to everyone—including you.

DIAL INFORMATION

When the telepath answers your call, signal him by clicking your fingernail across the groove of the telephone (*A*, Fig. 1). This assures him that the call comes from you. He then says slowly, "Penny . . . nickel . . . dime . . . quarter . . . fifty cents." Click again when he names the chosen coin. This tells him both the denomination and the date. He then checks the guests by saying, "Man . . . woman. . . ." If both of those whom you have described are present, do nothing. But if either one failed to attend, signal at the appropriate moment. If possible, call your friend secretly after the guests arrive and give him last minute information, such as the fact that the blonde is wearing red. Of course, if you can make this secret call, the telepath will not need to have you confirm the presence of particular guests when you dial him again.



After another pause, the telepath says that the coin is silver, and he gets the number "five." However, he cannot say whether it is a quarter or a fifty-cent piece because there is interference from a large gentleman connected with the law—"a policeman, or perhaps a judge." As one guest is actually a fat lawyer, this is highly convincing.

"Tell him to stop trying to guess how the trick is worked," the telepath continues, "there isn't any trick. And if you'll all concentrate on the date of the coin by repeating it over and over to yourselves, I'll try to tell you what it is." There is a longer pause this time. After it, the telepath says, "The date on the coin is 1962. Don't be so skeptical about things you can't understand," and hangs up.

Dial Information is actually an improved and dramatized variation on an old trick known as *The Wizard*. In this version, you prepare yourself by having all your pennies the same date, all your nickels the same date, and so on. Make a card like this and give it to the telepath.

1¢	1951	10¢	1948	50¢	1963
5¢	1964	25¢	1962		

He knows in advance that the object will be a coin. If he is told its denomination, he can announce this and read the date from his card. You also give him advance descriptions of one man and one woman whom you expect to be present.

You mention the "unlisted" number to keep anyone else from offering to dial or from trying to call the telepath later. Do not stress this. Merely work it into the conversation so that you can refuse to give the number if anyone asks for it.

The method of signaling is explained in Fig. 1.

MEANING, SHOWMANSHIP, TECHNIQUE

Meaning creates drama. Houdini's escapes made him the most famous wonder-worker of all time. His reputation did not depend on any one feat, no matter how daring or how appar-

ently impossible it might be. What counted was the fact that he seemed able to escape from every sort of restraint that his challengers could devise. He amazed multitudes less by the feats that he actually showed them than by the countless other escapes which they believed he had performed. It was this reputation for being able to get out of *anything*, plus the fact that escapes are fundamentally romantic, which gave meaning to Houdini's performances. In later years, when he turned to straight conjuring, he was much less impressive. His fame still provided him with audiences, but all that the spectators saw was another entertainer doing meaningless tricks.

Showmanship brings out the meaning of a performance and gives it an importance that it might otherwise lack. The telepath in *Dial Information* could say, "I get an impression from two minds. A large, heavily built lawyer is thinking of a coin. The thought which comes to me from a blonde young lady in a red dress tells me that this coin is a quarter. If you will look at the date, you will find that it is 1962." This is actually more marvelous than the version given above, but it is much less impressive because it is completely lacking in showmanship.

When showmanship is carried far enough, it can even create an illusion of meaning where none exists. Houdini's showmanship was developed to glamorize his escapes, and he had little success in adapting it to his performances as a conjurer. There was, however, one exception—*The Needle Trick*. That consists in placing a packet of needles and a length of thread in the mouth and then pulling out the thread with the needles strung on it.

This does not even make sense. Is the performer supposed to thread the needles with his tongue? If so, the way the thread is handled makes the idea absurd. Or does he swallow both thread and needles and make the latter thread themselves magically in his stomach? In that case, the stomach is merely a container; it would be safer and more convincing if the magic took place in an ordinary box. Few spectators go through this reasoning in detail. However, most of them realize instinctively that the trick itself is trivial. When the average conjurer presents it, the interest of the audience is largely confined to the question, "will this rash idiot swallow a needle and require surgery?" Sometimes he does.

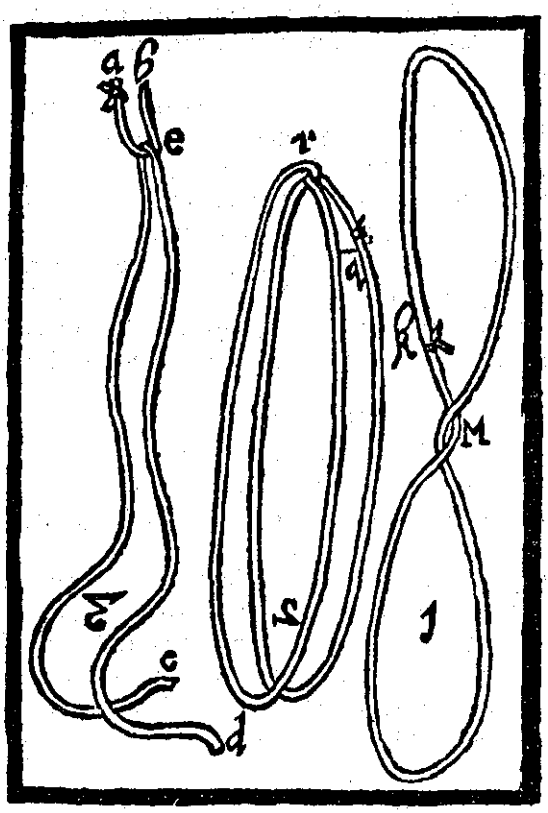
In Houdini's hands, however, this meaningless bit of legerdemain became a minor miracle simply through his superb showmanship. That began with his costume. For matinees, he wore formal afternoon clothes like an ambassador going to pay a call at the White House. At evening performances, he wore tails. He invited twenty or thirty spectators to come up onto the stage. This has no real significance, but it gave the impression that he was performing a large-scale "illusion." When calling for volunteers, he made a special point of requesting a dentist. If one consented to assist, Houdini asked him to examine his mouth—and provided a dental mirror for the purpose. Most performers use one packet of needles; Houdini used two. Most performers are content with six feet of thread; Houdini used thirty. When the thread was drawn out, it stretched all the way across the stage. This action was accompanied by music from the orchestra, with the trap drummer striking a bell so that it tinkled as each needle appeared between Houdini's lips.

These things may seem trivial in cold print, but they held Houdini's audience spellbound for ten or twelve minutes. I remember every detail after forty years, whereas much better (but less well presented) tricks have long since faded from my memory.

Technique has two elements. The first is the method of deception. Compare, for example, *Dial Information* with *The Wizard* on which it is based. In *The Wizard*, a spectator is asked to choose a card and display it. The performer then dials the "wizard's" telephone number. When the latter answers, he begins naming the suits. When he reaches the right one, the conjurer asks, "Is the wizard there?" This tells the "wizard" the suit of the chosen card. He then starts counting. When he reaches the number of the chosen card, the performer says, "Hello, Wizard," and hands the card to someone else. The "wizard" then names the card.

Dial information improves this technique in several ways: (1) It uses coins instead of cards; that tends to make the audience accept it as a serious demonstration of telepathy instead of just another card trick. (2) The performer seems unaware of the date of the coin until after he has left the telephone. (3) He apparently does nothing which can possibly be construed as a signal. (4) Even if the performer is suspected of knowing the

facts and signaling them in some way, it seems that he must transmit the denomination and date of the coin and a description of two spectators indetectibly in the few seconds that he holds the receiver. As this is actually impossible, few people will accept it as an explanation. That leaves only telepathy.



2. STRING TRICK FROM HOCUS POCUS, JR.
Published in 1634

Technique also covers the conjurer's manner of presentation —how he moves, how he speaks, what he says, his timing, and the skill with which he conceals any devices that may be necessary.

In an ideal performance, the spectators should be able to follow the ideas of the illusion, step by step. Nothing should be allowed to divert their attention to anything else. In most cases, any lack of polish on the part of the performer becomes a

distraction. An awkward movement or an inaudible word interrupts the smooth flow of thought and leads the minds of the audience away from the illusion. Nevertheless, there are exceptions. In *Dial Information*, for example, noticeable polish would be a mistake. You want everything to seem impromptu, and you do not want anyone to look on you as a performer. If the audience regards you as part of the act, most of the mystery will be lost.

Meaning provides the magic of drama. Showmanship intensifies or exaggerates the meaning. Technique keeps the meaning from being diluted by distractions.

If we are to add the powerful magic of meaning to the magic of conjuring, we must learn how to dramatize our presentations by making them significant. That is not merely the first step, it is also the fundamental one. When a routine has a built-in meaning, we find many opportunities for showmanship; when there is no meaning, the showman has little with which to work.

Adding the Meaning

The procedure for providing a routine with a meaning is best explained by an example. Let us start with one of the oldest and least meaningful effects in conjuring, the cut-and-restored string. Fig. 2 was taken from *Hocus Pocus, Jr.*, the second book on conjuring ever printed in English. Instead of cutting the string in the center, the performer merely cuts off one end. He gets rid of this in some way and then shows the main portion, which he claims has been restored.

Countless improvements on this trick have been devised. The best one is based on an idea of Karl Germain's. We shall call it:

THE INSEPARABLE STRING

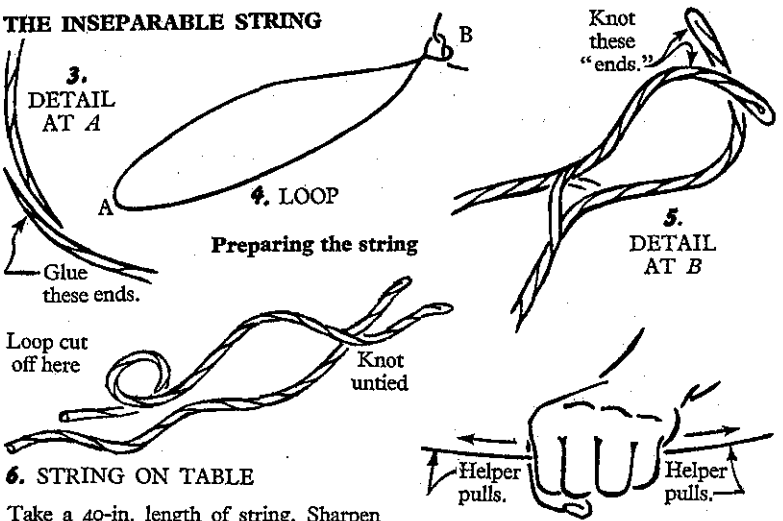
Figs. 3–5 show the preparation. The performer begins by taking the loop of string and offering to present a trick. He puts his hands through the loop to reveal it clearly. No one can suspect that a string is continuous at Point *B*, Fig. 4. Next, he takes a pair of scissors from his pocket and snips off the glued bit (Point *A*). He puts this in his pocket with the scissors. He then unties the knot and drops the string on the table—where it looks like Fig. 6.

"We now have two lengths of string and four ends. Choose either pair of ends." If the spectator selects the real ends, the performer adds, "Take one in each hand." If the spectator selects the joined ends, the performer remarks, "All right, I shall now proceed to join the ends you chose to-

gether." In either event, he takes the twisted "ends" (actually the center) in his fist and has the spectator hold a real end in each hand—or each of two spectators may hold an end (Fig. 7).

The conjurer then says, "I will now restore the string by saying a few magic words. However, while I do so, you must help me by pulling on both ends of the string. Are you ready? Pull. Hocus pocus, abracadabra, alakazam!" The pulling has untwisted the fake ends and twisted them again to re-form the original center of the string. When the conjurer removes his hand, the string is seen to be completely restored and will stand the closest examination.

THE INSEPARABLE STRING



Preparing the string

6. STRING ON TABLE

Take a 40-in. length of string. Sharpen both ends (Fig. 3). Make a continuous loop (Fig. 4) by joining these ends with white glue (Elmer's is the best known brand). Untwist the strands of the section opposite the joint. Divide these into two parts and retwist them to make two short "ends" (Fig. 5). Tie these together loosely with an overhand knot (*B*, Fig. 4). The result looks like a plain loop with its ends tied in a square knot.

7. STRING IN FIST

This is a brilliant trick. It avoids all false moves and will fool spectators who either know the *Hocus Pocus, Jr.* method or are shrewd enough to see through it. Nevertheless, it is just a trick. The spectators may be impressed by its cleverness, but they are not convinced even for an instant that the string has been cut and restored. Instead, they have been challenged to solve a puzzle. It is a frustrating puzzle because the conjurer refuses to supply the answer even when they "give up."

Although *The Inseparable String* fools spectators who would see through the older method, many people are fooled by either

method. As far as these people are concerned, both methods are equally good; in fact, they are both the same trick.

Can we give the continuous-loop method a meaning that will retain its deceptive qualities and still create a convincing illusion? We might find a cut-and-restored meaning, but this line of thought is hardly promising. Also, our illusion could be mistaken for merely another version of an old trick. However, when I first saw the continuous-loop method performed, I did not know that the string would be restored. For a moment, I thought I was witnessing a strong-man feat in which the performer held the ends of two pieces of string in his fist and defied the spectators to pull them free. This supplied a fresh meaning. It also furnished, temporarily, an effect which I believe is entirely new to conjuring. Of course, restoring the string destroyed the strong-man effect, but the following version eliminates this anticlimax.

The Strong Man's Secret

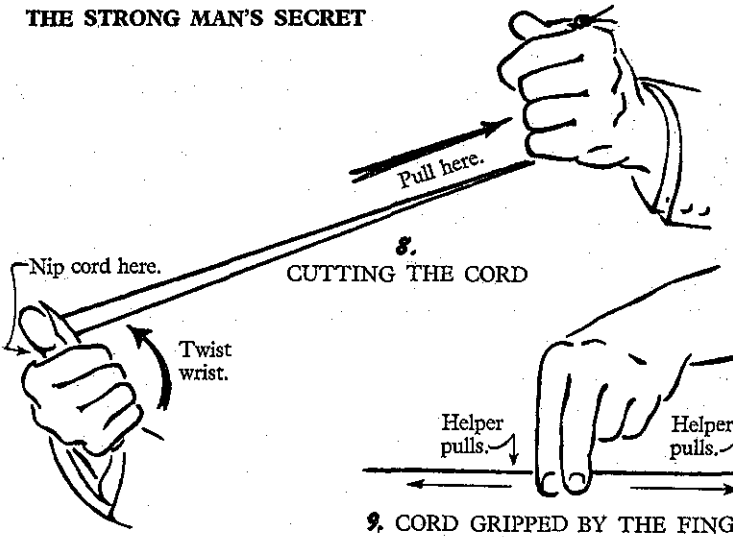
While chatting with a small group, you "happen" to find a loop of string in your pocket. Take this out and play with it. Casually introduce the subject of side shows. Work in any bit of lore you may have—such as the fact that the performers themselves no longer speak of "side shows" but of "freak shows" and that the old-time "spielers" and "barkers" are now called by the more dignified title of "lecturers." Handle all this merely as interesting items of conversation with no hint that you are leading up to anything more.

State that the strong men have always been your favorites. They are genuinely powerful, but they fake their acts so that they seem to perform feats which are actually impossible. Indeed, some of their demonstrations, such as tearing a telephone book in half, require more knack than strength. At this point, the string reminds you of one strong-man's stunt that you can do yourself. Unfortunately, you are not free to explain it because the performer who taught you made you promise not to reveal his secret. However, you are willing to demonstrate it if anyone is interested—and if you can remember just how it works.

The procedure is almost the same as that for *The Inseparable String*, but there are a few changes.

The natural way to divide a piece of string is to cut it at one spot, but you must snip off the glued loop. The best method of doing this is with a sharp penknife (Fig. 8). Although this is not quite natural, a knife is much less noticeable than a pair of scissors. Also, the technique in Fig. 8 permits you to sever the string without looking at it. If you make the cut that way, few people will pay any attention to the action.

Do not offer a choice; merely take the twisted ends in your fist (Fig. 7). Give one cut end to a spectator on your right and the other to one on your



8. CUTTING THE CORD

9. CORD GRIPPED BY THE FINGERS

left. Tell them to pull hard but avoid jerking "as that might yank the loose ends out of your hand and spoil the stunt."

Holding two pieces of string in your fist against a strong pull is quite a feat in itself, but you can do better. Ask for a little slack. Carefully work the string down in your hand until it is held between two fingers and your thumb (Fig. 9). Tell the spectators to pull again. You can still hold the string. When they let go, gather it up and drop it into your pocket.

This routine introduces the important principle of *conservation.* You could hold the string with your thumb and *one* finger. However, this is so incredible that the audience may suspect something more than a mere strong-man stunt and guess that the string had been restored. This would still be a good trick, but it would confuse the issue. The impression made on the minds of the spectators would be seriously weakened.

The Strong Man's Secret offers only a minor example of conservation. We shall find more important applications of the principle as we proceed. The Japanese define an artist as "one who has the ability to do more and the will to refrain." This definition covers showmanship as well. Showmanship adds glamor and drama. However, if we try to give any routine more importance than it will bear, we destroy the illusion and may reveal the secret.

The Strong Man's Secret provides much more entertainment than *The Inseparable String* because it has much more meaning.

The preliminary information about freak shows takes your audience behind the scenes of a world that most people regard as strange and mysterious. If you read up on the subject, you can hold the interested attention of the group for five minutes or more before you even mention strong men. This introduction also gives significance to the routine. It ceases to be just another cut-and-restored-string trick, or even just another conjuring trick. It is something brand-new, a demonstration from the exotic world of carnivals and freak shows. Finally, where *The Inseparable String* convinces no one, *The Strong Man's Secret* convinces everyone. They are convinced merely of a trick, but the trick they think they saw bears no relation to the trick you actually performed. This is as genuine an illusion as Robert-Houdin's demonstration of *invulnerability*.

Tricks Preferred

What I have written is not intended to imply that tricks are dull. I enjoy them immensely. However, as illusions are more entertaining, have greater impact, and are equally easy to perform, conjurers miss a great deal when they fail to take advantage of the magic of drama. In spite of this, there are important exceptions to the rule. Situations exist in which tricks are definitely better than illusions.

Children are highly entertained by tricks. They regard the conjurer as a glamorous figure and enjoy matching wits with him. They are convinced that they can almost grasp his secrets, and that they could do his tricks themselves if they could get hold of his apparatus.

This does not mean that convincing illusions would fail to impress children. On the contrary, they would succeed only too well. Overimaginative youngsters might accept the conjurer as a genuine magician and become afraid of him. Even those with harder heads could mistake a routine like *Dial Information* for proof of the occult. That would be bad for the children. It certainly would not please their parents—who pay the performer's fees.

Salesmen who use conjuring to gain attention and good will are in much the same position as the man who entertains children, though for different reasons. A good salesman uses a trick just as he would a joke. The trick is more effective because the prospect hears many jokes, but a trick is a refreshing

novelty. In both cases, however, the salesman is acting as Court Jester to His Majesty the Prospect.

A salesman who allowed himself to present convincing illusions would give evidence of extraordinary powers or unusual skill. That would make him seem superior to the prospect. The wise salesman does not flatter his own ego. He wants the prospect to feel superior. Hence, he offers his tricks simply as tricks and says, or at least implies, "There is really nothing to it. You could do the same thing yourself if you could spare the time to practice." This kind of conjuring sells goods. It is not, and is not intended to be, a convincing display of mystification as a fine art.

Torture routines, such as *Sawing a Woman in Half*, provide a third instance where illusions are undesirable. When these routines are offered frankly as tricks, they create no illusion, but they can be highly entertaining. If a foolish performer dramatized them to the point where the audience could almost feel the blade tear through human flesh, they would become violently unpleasant.

Conjuring for Conjurers—and Laymen

Membership in a conjuring society offers many advantages: encouragement, suggestions, criticisms, and unparalleled opportunities for studying the art of deception. Nevertheless, performing for conjurers is the worst possible way to test the value of your presentations. Everything you do, literally everything, has a different value for conjurers than it has for laymen. Conjurers are fascinated by subtle devices and difficult sleight of hand. Laymen are incapable of appreciating either the subtlety or the difficulty. In fact, if the performance succeeds, the layman cannot even guess what methods have been used. On the other hand, laymen are easily impressed by illusions, whereas conjurers are immune except in rare cases like *The Charlatan.* If you try to dramatize a routine for a brother conjurer, you will merely bore him—unless he sees something in your routine that he can use in his own act.

When you work out a routine for laymen, test it on a friend who knows nothing about conjuring. Ask for his detailed criticism. Then try your routine on another friend and get his opinion. If several laymen find fault with the same spot in your routine, it is bad.

A layman's diagnosis of what is wrong will usually be false and will often be absurd, but he almost always puts his finger on the point where the trouble lies. When lay friends criticize your presentation of *The Strong Man's Secret* "because you held your hand in a funny way while the string was being pulled," you need not pay much attention to their reasons. Perhaps your face provided a clue, or it may have been something you said. On the other hand, you can be fairly sure that *something* went wrong at the point they criticize.

This is true no matter what you think and no matter what your conjurer friends think. It is true whether your lay critics are intelligent or stupid. You are preparing a routine for the public, and the public contains a large percentage of fools. The only way to gauge audience reactions in advance is to find out how laymen actually react. If you are concocting a new dog food, the opinion of a battery of French chefs is worthless—you must try it on a jury of dogs.

Your friends' criticisms may hurt your feelings, but never let them suspect it. If they do, they will stop telling you the truth. On the other hand, do not put much weight on one layman's opinion. Get several to criticize your routine. Individuals may have freak prejudices. You cannot hope to please everyone.

This book deals with methods of creating illusions by the magic of drama. Some of these methods, especially those concerned with showmanship, can be adapted to tricks as well. If you are primarily interested in appealing to children, sales prospects, or conjurers, you must decide for yourself how far my suggestions apply. On the other hand, if you are interested in entertaining the general adult public, I feel confident that convincing illusions will be far more successful than any collection of tricks, however puzzling.