

THE GREAT WIZARD OF THE WEST.

MR. J. N. MASKELYNE AT THE EGYPTIAN HALL.

WITH the choice of three rendezvous, I deliberated whether I should pay my morning call at Nevil House—a pleasantly situated and commodious residence overlooking Battersea Park, which Mr. Maskelyne has built for himself, and where he is to be seen before 10 a.m.—whether I should accept his invitation to spend a Sunday at Spring Cottage, Bucklebury Common, in the bracing atmosphere of a lovely plateau between Reading and Newbury, and standing 500 ft. above the sea-level, at which spot Mr. Maskelyne seeks his Sabbath rest and recuperation; or whether I should call upon the subject of this interview during his working hours at the Egyptian Hall, where Mr. Maskelyne spends his mornings, in company with his son, either in the workshop or inventing scientific and mechanical problems and machines to supply commercial requirements.

For various reasons, I elected to pay my visit to the Egyptian Hall, where I was courteously received by Mr. Maskelyne in his cosy office, and where for upwards of an hour I enjoyed a most interesting and instructive conversation.

The man who holds the trickery of Conjuring, Card-sharping, Spiritualism, and Theosophy in the palm of his hand is of a genial nature. He is full of humour, apt of speech, and replete with quotation when occasion arises. Yet, in his quiet manner, you would scarcely suspect his possession of the lightning speed of sleight-of-hand, his quickness of eye in the detection of imposture, and his genius in all mechanical avocations. Perhaps his very demeanour is part of the art by which he conceals his art. His discoveries of imposture are all the more wonderful because, especially of late years, he has been handicapped by his public appearances. He has laboured constantly under the disadvantage of his personality being so well known that chicanery can never be brought to face him—impostors naturally refusing to meet him on any terms whatever. The laurels of his victories have sprung from his *modus operandi* of

fighting trickery with weapons forged at the same smithy. The homœopathic principle "*Similia similibus curantur*," apparently, has been Mr. Maskelyne's prescription, although his cures have not been administered in at all minute doses. In effect he says: "The same phenomena you profess to produce by supernatural agency I can produce by the ordinary laws regulating Nature." Indeed, a knowledge of science makes an open book of so-called occultism, while it also explains its existence.

"You are an Englishman, Mr. Maskelyne, I believe, in spite of the fact that your name has a foreign ring about it?" I said, commencing our conversation.

"Oh, yes," he replied, "I am English to the backbone. I was born at Cheltenham in 1839, consequently I am fifty-five years of age. I am a member of an old Wiltshire family which can be traced back to the Conqueror—not that that is anything to be proud of. I suppose all our ancestors were robbers at some time or another; but, as somebody has said: 'It is as well to know that the robbers were so many generations back.' One member of my family, Dr. Nevil Maskelyne, held the post of Astronomer Royal for forty-five years, and was the first compiler of the 'Nautical Almanack.'"

"It would be interesting to learn who first instructed you in the art of conjuring?"

"Well, then, I never had a lesson in my life; to which fact I attribute the originality of my mysteries. For, instead of working in the old grooves and performing old tricks which I should have been taught, I set to work inventing tricks for myself. There were no Hoffmann's books of magic when I was a boy. The conjuring books at that time were frauds. They either explained nothing worth knowing or gave false explanations. I remember, as a boy, saving up my pence to buy a book which professed to explain the production of bowls of water containing goldfish from a shawl, and was disgusted to find it stated that the fish and water were carried in a belt round the

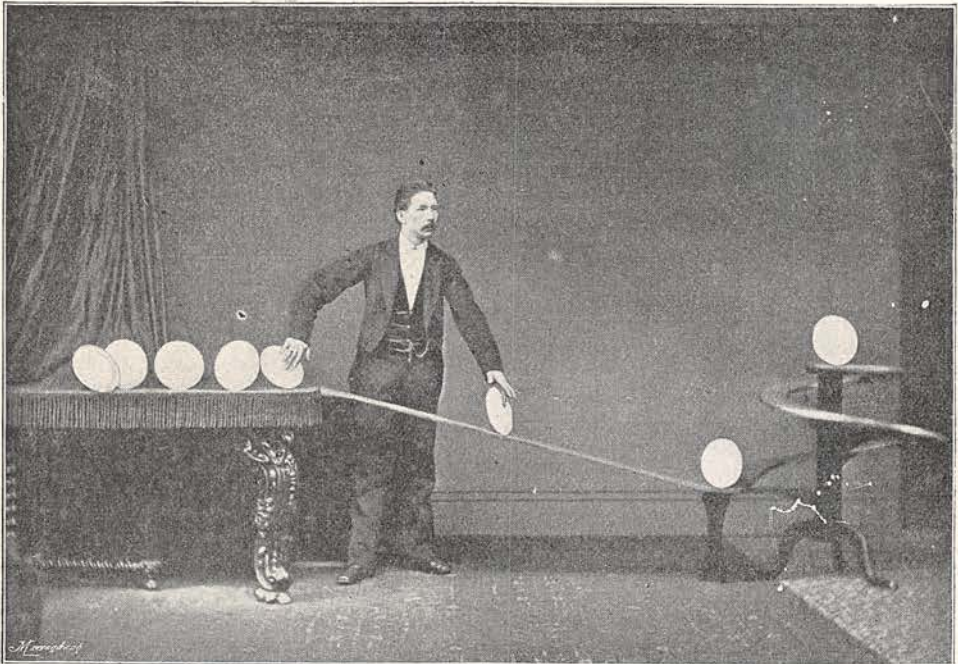
waist, that the empty glass bowls were taken from the pockets under cover of the shawl and filled by means of a tap concealed under the waistcoat. At the age of sixteen I could give an hour's performance of sleight-of-hand and optical and mechanical illusions, using apparatus invented and constructed entirely by myself."

"You must have had a previous knowledge of mechanics to construct the apparatus?"

"Oh, yes, I had. You see at that time I was apprenticed to a watchmaker and

feat. How long did it take you to become proficient?"

"I must have spent several years upon it altogether. I have practised it for eight hours a day months in succession. In fact, there is no feat of jugglery half so difficult, certainly none so elegant, and very few have had the patience to master it thoroughly. Like many other feats, the least difficult part appears most wonderful to the public. But I never allow that to influence me; there is more satisfaction to myself in accomplishing what is most



THE FAMOUS PLATE-SPINNING.

Photo by W. Child, Leeds.

jeweller. I believe I can trace my first desire to become a conjuror to watching Blitz—a popular entertainer in the forties and fifties—who was a friend of my father's, and he would frequently amuse us with tricks of sleight-of-hand. I have a vivid recollection, although my chin was not so high as the table at the time, of being taken in to see Blitz spin dessert-plates after dinner. I watched him with breathless astonishment, and when he had finished he patted me on the head, saying, 'What do you think of it, my little man?' I replied, 'I will do it too, when my fingers grow big.' And you see I have kept my word."

"It must be an exceedingly difficult

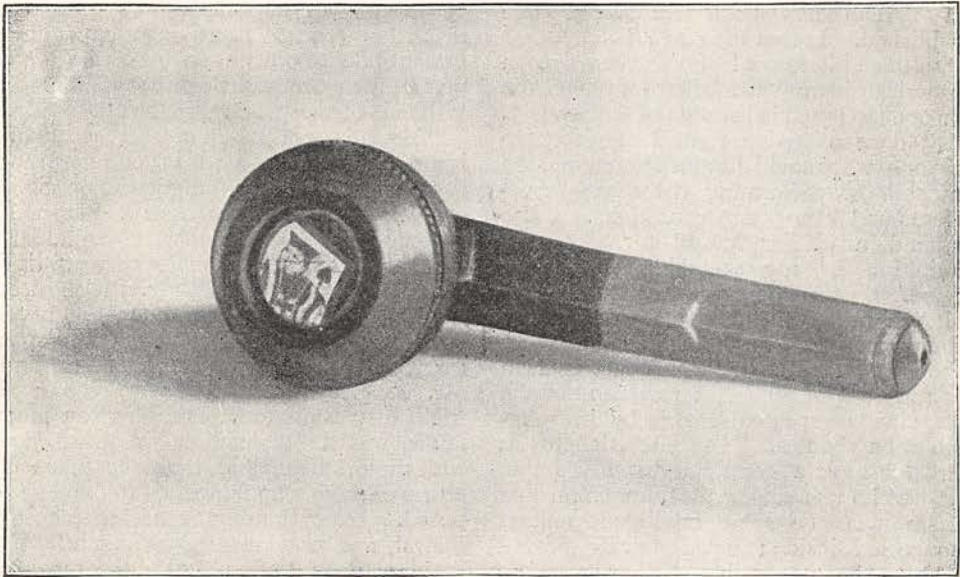
difficult. For instance, if I set a large washhand-basin spinning, it creates much more applause than the manipulation of a seven-inch plate; yet the basin requires little or no dexterity—it will keep in motion a long time, and a dozen or more can easily be kept spinning at the same instant. A small plate, on the contrary, requires the most delicate touch, and will spin only ten seconds; consequently, it is impossible to keep more than five or six in motion at one time."

Here Mr. Maskelyne took up a cheese-plate and put it through the most extraordinary gyrations: making it walk, gallop, waltz, play see-saw, and dance a hornpipe.

Resuming our conversation, he said: "I have devoted most of my attention to the production of optical and mechanical mysteries; in fact, I have not practised sleight-of-hand for more than thirty years. I observed when a youth that mechanical mysteries always created the most astonishment. For instance, when Houdin apparently threw a coin into the air, and the audience saw and heard it fall into a closed crystal box suspended over their heads, it created much more surprise than the most finished sleight-of-hand of Hermann. I

was created. But in these days none but the merest yokel would wonder at such a trick. If I require to play drums by electricity, as I do with my electric orchestra, no attempt at concealment is made. The magnets and beaters are placed outside, and the public can see the sparks given off by the contact-breakers. No; Houdin's tricks would not draw sixpence now. We have gone a long way beyond them, in the natural course of evolution."

"I believe it is a popular idea that all your wonderful illusions are produced by



PIPE-REFLECTOR *IN SITU*.

From "Sharps and Flats."

allude, of course, to the original Hermann, who has been dead some years."

At this point I asked Mr. Maskelyne if he did not think some of Houdin's tricks would be interesting if revived at the present day. To this he replied: "Certainly they would be interesting, inasmuch as they would show what was considered marvellous forty years ago, but they would not astonish anyone now. In Houdin's time electricity was in its infancy (indeed, he was the first to utilise it for conjuring), but its capabilities are so well understood nowadays that little effect can be produced by its aid. Houdin would hang a drum over the heads of his audience, and when by means of an electromagnet and beater, concealed in the drum, it would rap out the names of cards and so on, the most profound astonishment

the use of mirrors," I presently remarked. "Is that so?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I have not employed any kind of mirror upon my stage for several years. It is true I have used them in every conceivable manner, and they are still used frequently in appearing and disappearing illusions at music-halls; but the audiences here are much more critical, being largely composed of persons who take an interest in mysteries. Therefore, mirrors are practically useless to me, for the merest tyro in optics can detect by the 'fit-up' the presence of looking-glasses the moment he glances at the stage, the drapery or decoration of which must necessarily possess a certain uniformity in order that the part reflected shall be the counterpart of that concealed by the mirror."

"Shall you ever introduce your wonderful automata again?"

"Yes. I think that will be the next change I shall make in my programme. I am at work upon 'Psycho' at the present time, making repairs and improvements in the mechanism. I was obliged to withdraw the automaton, not because it had ceased to interest the public, but because after four thousand consecutive performances the delicate mechanism—and it is delicate—required overhauling. Besides, I had a number of improvements to add which will make it infinitely more wonderful."

"I have heard it stated that the secret of Psycho has been discovered and published. Is that the case?"

"Indeed it is not! Some years ago an American journal put forward a pneumatic theory as a possible solution of the mystery. I at once offered a reward of £2000 to anyone who could produce an automaton capable of performing the same movements under the same conditions. I also offered a similar reward for a correct imitation of my sketching automaton, 'Zoe.' This challenge I advertised in all the principal newspapers throughout the world, but it has never been accepted, though it is still open. This fact in itself is a more than sufficient refutation of the statements repeatedly made by irresponsible busybodies. The late Richard A. Proctor took a great interest in Psycho. At first he was under the impression that there must be some intelligent midget concealed inside; but I quickly proved that to be impossible. Shortly before he died, Mr. Proctor replied to a correspondent that Psycho was a profound secret, and that none of the theories which had been suggested could account for the movements of the automaton. A great number of tricks and toys have been constructed and called 'Psychos' and 'Zoes.' I remember an amusing circumstance which occurred at the time I was advertising my £4000 challenge. Next to my advertisement in the *Era* appeared the following: 'Psycho for sale, exactly the same as Mr. Maskelyne's now performing at the Egyptian Hall, together with a dress-coat nearly new to fit a stout gentleman, price £8.' Psycho occupied me for upwards of two years in its construction, and I and my son have spent quite eighteen months upon improvements. In fact, Psycho when he next appears will perform miracles, and be the only genuine 'Mahatma' (of the Theosophical order of

architecture) ever seen, except in the 'Astral Body.'"

"You appear to have your eye upon the 'Mahatmas' at present, and to be giving spiritualism a rest?" I asked, in reference to the latest "turn," entitled "Modern Witchery, or the Miracle of Lh'asa."

"Yes, I think spiritualism may now be left to drag on its dreary existence. It is impossible to stamp it out entirely. To this day I frequently receive letters from devotees. For instance, here are two letters I received quite lately. They are not long ones, so you may care to read them. 'You had better call Ruby,' said one. The other correspondent wrote, 'I have been informed by spiritualism that the recent horrifying impending catastrophe to the moon by Sirius, or a planet, was the work of the great poet, William Shakespeare. [Signed] A Lady.'

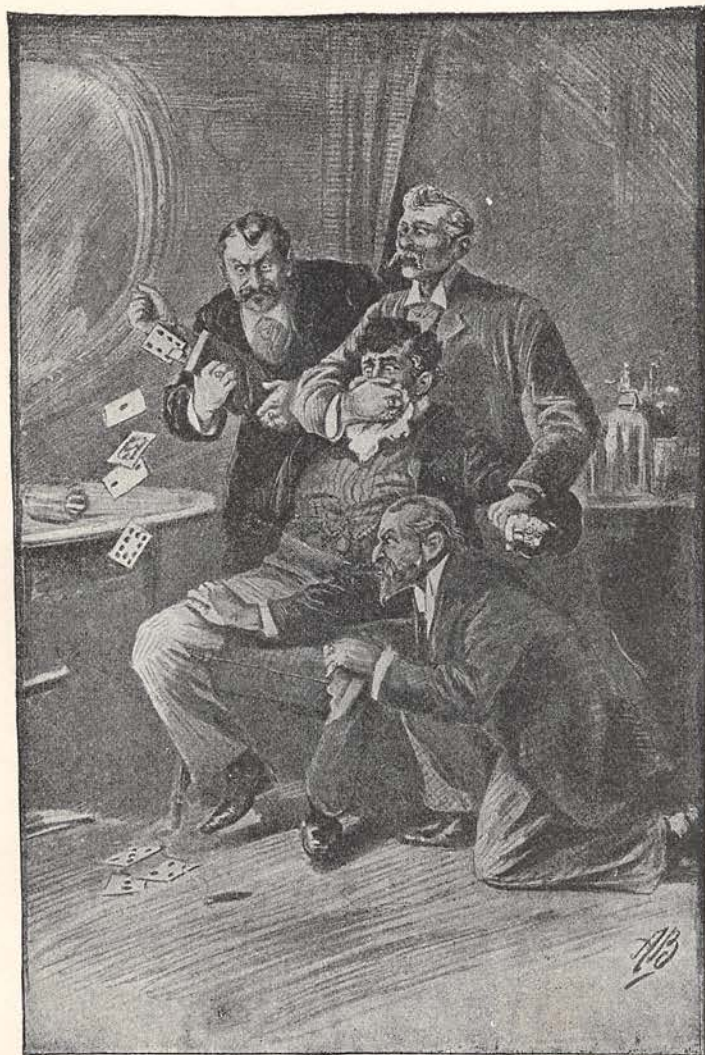
"You must bear in mind that spiritualism has always existed in one form or another, but as far as the general public is concerned it is as dead as a door-nail. No exposure of its frauds can excite the slightest interest, the majority regarding it as simply exploded humbug. In America, I believe, matters are in much the same condition. Only a few weeks ago the surviving 'Davenport Brother,' Ira, and Mr. Fay, attempted to revive the rope tricks in Washington. Mr. Fay, you must know, was an understudy who travelled with the brothers, and took the place of either of them who happened to be indisposed. After thoroughly advertising the revival, and obtaining a number of preliminary puffs in the Press, the receipts at the first performance amounted to only 11 dollars 50 cents. They were advertised for six nights, but they closed after the first performance, and their 'cabinet' was distrained on for rent. The famous 'Dr. Slade,' who created such excitement in London in 1876, and made so much money with his slate-writing, was recently taken to a workhouse in America, penniless, friendless, and a lunatic. Contrast this state of things with the palmy days of spiritualism, when Home and the Davenports hob-nobbed with princes and emperors, and received costly gifts from the hands of princesses and empresses. Surely it is a vain hope for Mr. Stead to attempt to revive this exploded imposture. In adopting spiritualism for business purposes, I think he has made a very grave mistake. Certainly, he does not confine his business to spiritualism alone, but appeals for support to Theosophists, hypnotists, clairvoyants, crystal-gazers, thought

readers, faith-healers, astrologers, and a host of other impostors and their eccentric followers, who are blindly wandering on the borderland of insanity."

"I suppose you have met Mr. Stead?"

"Oh yes, more than once. When Mr. Stead first commenced his investigations in

been successful in witnessing, alone with Eglinton, such startling manifestations that he suggested a *séance* should be arranged to which I and a mutual friend should be invited; but Eglinton flatly refused to meet me under any conditions whatever. The next best thing for me to do, then,



THE DISCOVERY OF KEPLINGER'S TRICK.

From "Sharps and Flats."

spiritualism, he appealed to me, through a mutual friend, to assist him, which I willingly consented to do. He was then holding *séances* with Mr. Eglinton, who was formerly a 'materialising medium'; but having been frequently detected in fraud, had turned his attention to the less risky business of slate-writing. Mr. Stead had

was to suggest certain safeguards against imposture, which Mr. Stead adopted, but although he sat with Eglinton for hours, not a ghost of a letter was written under those conditions. I will show you one of the tests I arranged," said Mr. Maskelyne, as he turned to a cupboard, and took down from an upper shelf what

appeared to be a flat tin box. Continuing, he said—

“One of the things which slate-writing mediums profess to accomplish is to write answers to questions upon slates securely locked up in a case, with a fragment of slate pencil inclosed. Therefore, I procured two small slates, upon one of which

spiritualism, and would make a convert of a great antagonist who had promised to proclaim the result to the world. Eglinton was to be allowed to take the slates home with him and keep them as long as he pleased. He promised to do so, but he ultimately refused to have anything to do with the test. I have suggested dozens



Photo by London Stereoscopic Co., Regent Street.

MR. NEVIL MASKELYNE.

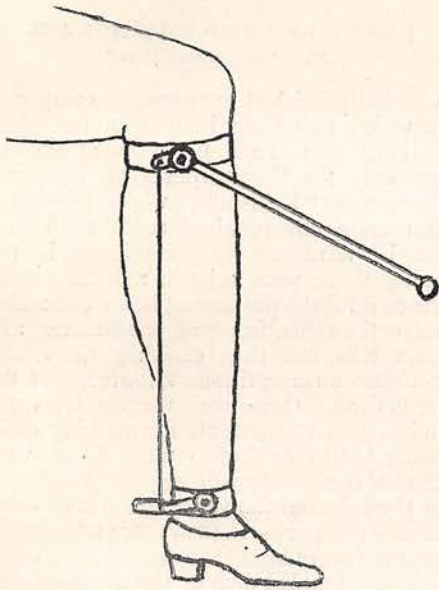
I wrote a question. The slates were then screwed together, with a morsel of slate-pencil between them, and then put into this tin case, which I soldered up as roughly as possible, leaving marks from the soldering-bolt which it would be impossible to reproduce, and which were photographed. I sent this case to Mr. Stead, desiring him not to let Eglinton know that it came from me, but to tell him that if he could get an answer written inside, it would be of the greatest possible advantage to

of similar tests for other people, but always with the same result. Subsequently, Mr. Stead arranged with my son to photograph a spirit under conditions which would preclude the possibility of trickery. To this end, Mr. Stead endeavoured to find a medium of unimpeachable character, but was informed by the spiritualists that they only knew of one—a lady who had left for Australia, and therefore was not available. Some months afterwards, I received a letter from Mr. Stead saying that he

had met with a wonderful materialising medium, and desired that we should attend to photograph a spirit at a *séance* to be held the next day; but, as usual, the next post brought the information that the medium had been taken ill, and the *séance* was postponed. Since then the camera and accessories have been constantly in readiness, but we are still waiting."

"It would be interesting to know how you first began to suspect the *bonâ fides* of spiritualism?"

"Well, I will readily tell you that. The first awakening of my interest in the exposure of spiritualistic frauds arose in



APPARATUS FOR TABLE-RAPPING.

this way. It was during my apprenticeship. Adjacent to our place of business there resided a man and woman who professed to effect cures by mesmerism. About that time table-turning became a fashionable amusement, and the Fox family had startled America by a second edition of the 'Cock Lane Ghost.' Well, these mesmerists commenced to hold spiritualistic *séances*, and one day the woman brought to our shop what she called a surgical appliance to be repaired. It consisted of two levers, a long one and a short one, each mounted upon a pivot attached to a strap, and connected by a piece of catgut. I will make you a sketch of it. As you may suppose, I entirely failed to see what kind of surgical appliance this thing could be, and was curious

to discover its real use. Having repaired it, I devoted a few minutes to experimenting with it, and found that by buckling the strap of the short lever round the left ankle, and that of the long lever round the leg just below the knee, by pressing the right heel upon a projection at the side of the short lever the long one could be jerked up and made to strike the under side of a table. Accordingly, I booked it as a table-rapping apparatus, and the bill was sent in: 'Repairs to table-rapping apparatus, 1s. 6d.' This I considered very sharp on my part at the time, but it was about the worst thing I could have done, as it prevented a complete exposure of these impostors being made. Although several persons, at my suggestion, attended the *séances* afterwards, with the object of catching the lady red-handed, no table-rapping was ever attempted. This was a lesson by which I profited greatly in my subsequent investigations."

"Of course you have no belief in apparitions, Mr. Maskelyne?"

"None whatever. I am certain that, apart from mere ordinary objective illusion, they exist only in the imagination. The great proof of this is the question of clothes. If spirits appeared, like some of the 'living pictures,' apparently in the nude, one might be inclined to believe in their reality. I believe I was the first to suggest this objection, about thirty years ago. I was having a discussion with Mr. Benjamin Coleman, surnamed 'The Father of English Spiritualists,' a very nice, amiable, and credulous old gentleman. He was describing a *séance* he had attended and where a lady saw the spirit of her grandfather. She had never seen him in earth-life, but recognised him from a painting. The spirit appeared in periwig, knee-breeches, and a green coat with gilt buttons. 'Then,' said I, 'this lady not only saw the spirit of her grandfather, but also the spirit of his green coat and gilt buttons!' Mr. Coleman looked at me with rather a puzzled expression. I continued: 'Do you really believe that there is such a thing as the spirit of a coat?' 'No,' said he, 'I can't think that, and I can't account for the appearance of the clothes, but I will ask the spirits.' The old gentleman told me afterwards that he had consulted 'Katey King' upon the subject. Katey King, as you may remember, was a very popular spirit at that time, so much so that she was frequently known to have appeared at several *séances* at the same moment. She was also the spirit who was

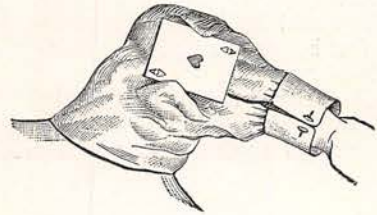
said to have carried Mrs. Guppy from Balls Pond to Lamb's Conduit Street, and it was the exposure of this spirit which sent poor Robert Dale Owen to a lunatic asylum. Well, Katey King shirked Mr. Coleman's question for some time, but he persisted in having an answer, and at last she replied, 'Why, of course, we materialise the clothes out of particles in the atmosphere.' This was a perfectly satisfactory explanation to the spiritualists, but even the most credulous members of the Society for Psychical Research cannot at present believe in the ghost of a pair of breeches. If they could, they would at once accept every nightmare story as a spiritual visitation. That cunning old impostor, Madame Blavatsky, tried to bridge over this difficulty by inventing the theory that there is an 'astral body' or counterpart to everything in existence and everything that has existed. So there must be an astral sea-serpent, an astral big gooseberry—in fact, an astral world and an astral universe."

"By the way, speaking of Madame Blavatsky, are there really any such persons as Mahatmas?"

"Certainly there are—but not of the Theosophical or occult type. A Mahatma is any person of superior attainments, nothing more. How we should smile if we heard of a Thibetan asserting that our professors of Oxford and Cambridge possessed occult powers! Yet that is precisely the position of the Theosophists with reference to the 'Mahatmas' of Thibet."

Leaving the subject of occultism, we then conversed upon the revelations

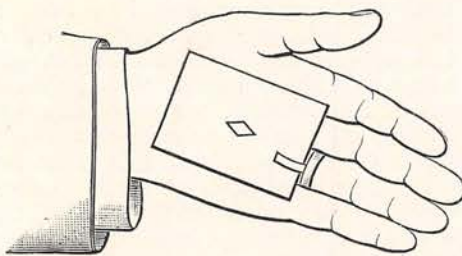
(Longmans) by Mr. Maskelyne is the discovery of the Kepplinger "hold-out." The *dénouement* is illustrated by a picture which is reproduced herewith, but the story must be read in its entirety to be fully appreciated. Turning to his cupboard, Mr. Maskelyne produced a variety of most



SHOWING CARD HELD UNDER THE ARM.
From "Sharps and Flats."

beautifully finished instruments, every one of which had been bought in the open market, and had been manufactured expressly for the purposes of cheating. There were "hold-outs," whose mission is to secrete any required cards until they can be advantageously employed in the game; there were minute reflectors constructed for the purpose of being concealed below the table, in pipes, snuff-boxes, and toothpicks, and thus enabling the dealer to obtain a surreptitious knowledge of the cards dealt; there were recipes for card-stains, and instruments for marking cards either before or during play; there were marked cards of every description, which told to the initiated the value and suit of every card in the pack—in fact, there were appliances of every kind that the "sharp" could desire. Loaded dice of the most finished construction were put into my hands, and I examined with interest the internal arrangements of the "Electric" variety. Mr. Maskelyne also explained to me so many sleight-of-hand dodges for cheating with a pack of cards that I felt quite convinced that the opportunities for cheating are far more numerous than anyone—including the "fly flat"—has any idea of. It would seem almost impossible that such mechanical contrivances should exist in our midst, did one not know that these things are extensively sold in America and are used—well, pretty nearly in every big city in the world. We give a few illustrations of some of these fraudulent devices, and can only remark, with Mr. Maskelyne, "Suspect your best friend if he is a gambler."

Pointing to an elegant machine which stood upon the table, I asked if that was the famous Maskelyne Typewriter.



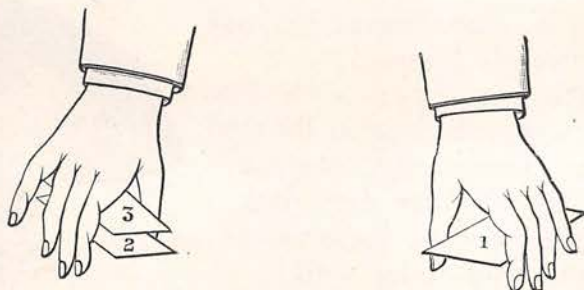
RING "HOLD-OUT."
From "Sharps and Flats."

contained in Mr. Maskelyne's book, "Sharps and Flats." This is unquestionably a work of absorbing interest, and I expressed some curiosity with regard to the appliances for cheating described therein. One of the most exciting incidents detailed in "Sharps and Flats"

"Yes," said Mr. Maskelyne; "that is the joint invention of myself and my son. Indeed, my son is responsible for the major portion of the invention. I arranged the differential spacing device which so many mechanics have tried to accomplish, but this is the first successful machine with varied spacing."

At my request, Mr. Maskelyne gave me a demonstration of the working of the machine, which proved most interesting. The type-bars are on the top of the machine, and when the keys are operated

witness one of the most attractive programmes Mr. Maskelyne has ever arranged for his patrons—the playlet "Modern Witchery," evidently founded upon the conversion of Mrs. Besant to Theosophy, and smartly written by Mr. Nevil Maskelyne, being the *pièce de résistance*. It is bristling with sarcasm, and not only exposes the frauds, but also holds up to ridicule the weak points and gross follies of this new cult. At the same time, it is made the vehicle for the introduction of two of the most inexplic-



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THE THREE-CARD TRICK.

From "Sharps and Flats."

they look like so many grasshoppers jumping with lightning rapidity from the ink-pad upon which they rest to the paper, and producing most beautiful work resembling letterpress. There are no crowded "M's" or "W's," or straggling "I's" or "L's" like rows of dilapidated railings stretching across the landscape, but each letter has its proper space, and the work is in full view of the operator, every character being seen the moment it is printed.

From his rich storehouse of facts, Mr. Maskelyne evidently could have prolonged this interview indefinitely, but the sound of rushing footsteps up the stairs announced the fact that it was half-past two, and that a crowd of people was fast filling the cosy little "Home of Mystery," anxious to

able wonders ever seen in this or any other age. One is called "The Miracle of Lh'asa." An Indian attendant is bound upon a plank which rests on the backs of two chairs, and is covered over with a shawl, a flaming goblet being placed beneath. In the full light of the stage the plank, with its living burden, is seen to rise into the air, the chairs are removed, and a sword is passed completely round and about, thus proving the absence of any tangible support.

I also went into the Hall with the hope of finding out how the illusion—which Mr. Maskelyne admits is a mechanical one—is effected, but the performance seems to me to increase in marvel the more often one witnesses it.

T. HANSON LEWIS.



Photo by London Stereoscopic Company, Regent Street.

MR. J. N. MASKELYNE.