

"PROFESSOR HOFFMANN" AND CONJURING.

BY GEORGE KNIGHT.



TWENTY years ago a certain volume bearing the seductive title "Modern Magic" was published. Notwithstanding that its price was three half-crowns, and that it appealed to a comparatively limited public, its first edition of two thousand copies was sold out within seven weeks, much to the surprise of its modest author—an unknown though clever amateur conjurer practising at the Chancery Bar. Since that time "Professor Hoffmann" has been an acknowledged authority upon conjuring, and "Modern Magic" has run through no less than nine editions.

In propria persona Professor Hoffmann is Mr. Angelo Lewis, and Mr. Angelo Lewis is a thriving journalist and *littérateur*, who resides in a charming little villa at Highgate.

"I haven't done any conjuring myself for over ten years," he tells me. "The strain upon an amateur's nerves is too great to be healthy for a man who does much brain-work in other ways. The professional, constantly repeating a fixed programme, soon finds the work comparatively easy. 'Custom doth make it in him a property of easiness,' as Hamlet says of the gravedigger; but the occasional performances of the amateur 'take it out of him' terribly, especially if he aspires to produce *novelties*, and I was always rather ambitious in that way."

The Professor's eyes gleam humorously behind his glasses.

"A new trick," he explains, "may be very good in itself—indeed many of the best tricks are invented by amateurs—but it is the professional who brings it to actual perfection.

The amateur, as I say, hasn't enough chances of practice—I don't mean rehearsal, but public performance. I have myself invented many tricks, though nothing very big or sensational, and when I was in the habit of giving conjuring performances—for charitable and such like objects—I think I generally managed to please my audiences, thanks to a certain facility in devising effective 'patter.' But I was always better as a writer

than as a performer. What I might have been as a professional of course I can't say. Even as an amateur I had at one time a good deal over a hundred pounds' worth of apparatus.

"How did I acquire my knowledge of magic? Well, it really began with the casual purchase of a simple trick in my boyhood. Later on, and purely out of my interest in the subject, I studied French and German handbooks (in the intervals practising at the Chancery Bar, to which I was called in 1861), and learnt a great deal from them. Early in the seventies there was announced a new series of *Every Boy's Magazine*, and, thinking to turn my

hobby to account, I wrote and offered to do a few articles on conjuring. I was asked to call. The publishers were impressed by the extent to which I had studied the subject, and suggested that I should undertake something more important—something which they could republish in book form after it had run as a serial. Ultimately I agreed to turn out a book of four hundred pages. We settled upon the title 'Modern Magic,' and then I remarked that I should want the book produced anonymously—I didn't expect that it would do a practising barrister any good



MR. ANGELO LEWIS ("PROFESSOR HOFFMANN").

to pose as the author of a work on conjuring. But Mr. Edmund Routledge urged that such a course would be prejudicial to the book, and I consented to a *nom de plume*. 'While you are about it,' Mr. Routledge observed, 'be a Professor.' I hit upon 'Hoffmann' as a name of uncertain nationality, and left the public to imagine, if they chose, that some distinguished German or American wizard was giving away the secrets of his craft. What the success of the book was you know already.

"By-the-bye, to hark back to my acquisition of information upon the subject of conjuring. When I started to write 'Modern Magic' I took a course of lessons from Professor Robert Hellis, an admirable drawing-room performer, whose success in another walk of life has since caused him to withdraw from the profession of wizard. By the time I had had half a dozen lessons he found that my book-knowledge was in its way the equivalent of his practical skill, so he proposed that thenceforward we should teach each other, which we accordingly did to our mutual satisfaction. Subsequently I studied card-conjuring under that extraordinary man M. Charlier, whose portrait I have endeavoured to draw—under the name of Ledoyen—in my story, 'Conjurer Dick,' and to whom my friend Bertram has devoted a large part of a chapter in his book, 'Isn't it Wonderful?' The rest of my knowledge, such as it is, comes of personal observation and friendly tips from the fraternity. For many years I never lost a chance of seeing a new conjurer, and often went over and over again in order fully to fathom his tricks.

"How does one find out a trick? By seeing it several times. Upon the second or third visit you perceive that some trifling incident, apparently unimportant, is repeated each time the trick is shown. The inference is clear that the movement in question, instead of being an accident, is really of the essence of the trick. Knowing this, and applying the general principles of conjuring, one is able almost invariably to see 'how it is done.'

"My knowledge of conjurers in general? I know most of the leading professionals, Maskelyne, Hartz, Bertram, Devant, Morrith, Stuart, Strode, Corelli, and many others. Know all their secrets? Scarcely that; but they tell me a good deal. I am happy to say that, although I do write books on conjuring, they are not afraid of me. They all know that anything told to me goes no further without special permission.

Of course many things are given me expressly for publication.

"Have the fraternity resented the exposure of their tricks? As a rule, not at all. The rank and file gained from it more than they lost. Previously there was no English text-book, and they had to buy their instruction very dearly. As for the higher class of performers, they rose to the occasion, took the tricks which I had described as a basis, and set to work to invent something better. With regard to the dealers, they were not too pleased at first; the immediate effect of the publication of 'Modern Magic' being to lower their prices. Of course they could not get as much for the secret of a trick which was no longer a secret; but on the other hand, for one customer they got in the old days they now have five or six. They push my books to the utmost. Hamleys in particular deal in them largely; so did Bland in his lifetime.

"As regards other books: in 1890 I published a sequel to 'Modern Magic,' a volume called 'More Magic.' But prior to its appearance, and since that of 'Modern Magic,' I had done a good deal of similar work. I translated all of Robert Houdin's works, with the exception of his 'Confidences,' which had already been done, and I had written one or two other books on conjuring.

"Yes, I am quite a practical literary man. I served my apprenticeship on the *Saturday Review*, under Douglas Cook's editorship, and have contributed to the *Cornhill*, *Temple Bar*, *Chambers's Journal*, and many other publications. In 1885 I took the prize of a hundred pounds offered by the *Youth's Companion* for the best short story (three columns) for boys. Then in my legal capacity I am the author of a couple of manuals on Indian Law. Besides all this, I have written on Cycling, on Puzzles, and on Home Gymnastics, and I have edited 'The Book of Card and Table Games,' the more important items being written by experts in the particular subjects. Just now I am editing another big volume, 'Every Boy's Book of Sport and Pastime,' put together on the same principle."

"To come back to conjuring, Mr. Lewis, what kind of an audience is most difficult to deceive?"

"All adult audiences are more or less easy to carry off their feet. The worst of all possible auditors is the small boy. He has no imagination, and he is all eyes and ears. The imagination of his elders is what

undoes them. Here is an instance. There is a very simple trick in which the conjurer, placing a pack of cards in a man's inside breast-pocket, commands him to take out quickly some particular card, and he does so. The explanation is that almost inevitably the card taken is the top card, that coming quickest to hand. A friend of mine once performed this trick, telling his subject jocosely that he would feel the card push itself into his fingers. So much was the subject impressed by the success of the trick that he confided solemnly to a neighbouring auditor that 'those cards were jumping about in my pocket.' Pure imagination, of course ; but individuals, and audiences too, not seldom help a performer in this fashion."

"A species of self-hypnotism?"

"Yes, using the word in a very lax signification. But then there has always hung about the conjurer's art a something quasi-supernatural. True, it is fast dying away ; but I remember my mother—dear old soul !—remarking at the close of a magical performance which I had been giving : 'Well, I *hope* it's all right.'"

"And now do you mind telling me, for my own information, something of how it is all really done. May I ask you some more questions?"

"Certainly," returned the Professor ; "but the answers must be strictly *entre nous*."

I am now thinking of abandoning journalism for magic. It's so easy—when you know how it's done.

