

Jews and the Magic Arts

An Interesting Contemporary Work

MAGIC arts which claimed to do "wonderful works by aid of supernatural means" developed in the past few centuries into an art that is used for the entertainment of people, especially of children, by arousing surprise, wonderment and curiosity. Only among backward peoples and primitive tribes is magic still associated with religious belief and attributed to miraculous and divine powers. Civilised peoples have come to recognise in it an art which requires extraordinary skill and which employs mechanical, chemical and other devices to produce certain illusions. The psychological factor is considered all important in the work of the magician who seeks to produce an effect upon his audience. It has thus become established as a legitimate art and some have even raised it to the position of a science, which has occupied the attention of many learned investigators at different times.

Gunther Dammann, apparently a German Jew, has recently published a book, "Die Juden in der Zauberkunst," in which he lists an array of Jewish professional and amateur magicians who attracted world-wide attention in the past two centuries. In his introduction, he points out that prior to the 18th century we come across no Jewish names among the practitioners of the art. Since that time, however, Jews have occupied a foremost position among magicians who entertained royalty and the masses in all parts of the world. The list contains about 50 names of professional magicians and a few amateurs. Practically all of them bore assumed names, but our author has delved into their private lives and discovered their Jewish origin even when they formally abjured the Jewish religion and joined the dominant church.

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Strange to relate, the very first name on the list is a Philadelphia Jew, who was known by the name of Philadelphus Philadelphia, although his real name was Jacob Meyer, born in this city in 1735 to immigrant Galician Jewish parents. He was a very fine mathematician and strongly inclined toward mysticism and Kabbalistic studies. His career began in England, where he met with considerable success, which encouraged him to pursue his art in other parts of Europe, performing in the presence of the Sultan of Turkey, of Frederick the Great of Prussia and of Catharine II. of Russia. Many of his feats, as

described in the periodicals of that period, were rather simple and would hardly attract much attention at the present time. In the 18th century, however, he was regarded with much awe and also called down upon himself the animosities of persons who wished to brand him as a fakir. Goethe Schiller, Schopenhauer and many other writers of that period make reference to the wonders performed by Jacob Meyer Philadelphia.

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A more important role was played by Philip Breslaw, a German Jew, who spent the greater part of his life in England, during the first half of the 18th century. He is described in the journals of the time as displaying "astonishing dexterity and deception in the grandest manner." He had a splendid career, both as a performer and as teacher of magic. He died in Liverpool in 1803. A family of magicians, extending for several generations, is that of the Bamberg family, coming originally from Leyden, the youngest scion of which, Dave Bamberg, is at present regarded as one of the foremost magicians of the younger set. This phenomenon was repeated in the last century in the famous Herrmann family, whose ancestor was probably a humble Galician Jew who performed tricks in small circles. The most renowned of this family was Combars Herrmann, who held the stage of the world for more than half a century and who was decorated by many kings and potentates for his consummate art. His brother, Alexander Herrmann, was known in England and in America as "Herman the Great" and became an exceedingly wealthy man through the income derived from his performances. He died in 1896 and is buried in New York. His nephews, Leon Herman and Felix Herman, continued their uncle's art. Other important Jewish names among the magicians of the past century are those of Ernest Thorn, Leopold Figner, Carl Hertz and Horace Goldin.

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Among the more recent protagonists of this art, Harry Houdini stands out as the most skilful and most astonishing performer. His real name was Erich Weiss. He was born in Budapest in 1874 and brought to America by his parents when he was but two years old. His art consisted mainly in being able to open most complicated locks and to emerge from the most

securely nailed and tied boxes or receptacles in the presence of large and critical gatherings. A new word has been added to the English language, "houdinize," which is defined as "to release or extricate oneself from confinement, bonds or the like as by wriggling out." To many this booklet will be of interest, as it reveals the place of the Jews in an art that has become quite important in the series of entertaining arts.

"Die Juden in der Zauberkunst," von Gunther Dammann, Berlin 1933, Wissmann Strasse 17.

Women's Zionist League

Office in Town.—An office has now been acquired for use of the League. It is No. 73 Sauer's Buildings. The hon. treasurer, Mrs. Segal, will be in attendance on Thursday mornings from 10.30 to 12.30, not Tuesday, as was first stated.

La Rochelle Branch.—The annual general meeting of this branch will be held on Thursday, March 1st, at 2.45 p.m. at the residence of Mrs. S. P. Jacobson, 173 Main Street, Kenilworth.

"MADAME BUTTERFLY" AT THE COLOSSEUM.

A poignant story of Japanese life is the theme of "Madame Butterfly" showing at the Colosseum Theatre this week. Sylvia Sidney, the new star upon the film horizon, appears in the leading role in "Madame Butterfly" and acts the poignant part in a charming and appealing manner. The production is on a lavish scale. The Colosseum orchestra continues to be an attractive feature of a fine programme.

PALESTINE CLUB.

The ninety-eighth meeting of the above Club will be held on Saturday, March 3rd, at 8.15 p.m., at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Benzion S. Hersch, 18, Lily Avenue, Berea. The lecturer on this occasion will be the Rev. A. T. Shrock, B.A., who will speak on "Legends and Fables."

ANNUAL BALL.

Under the auspices of the Zionist Youth Society of Germiston, the Annual Ball will be held at the Hotel Alexander, Germiston, on Saturday, March 24th. Johnny Jacob's Personal Five Orchestra will supply the music and an enjoyable evening is assured to all who attend.

A PURIM CABARET.

A Purim cabaret celebrating the fifth anniversary of the Sir Moses Montefiore Lodge No. 26, Hebrew Order of David, will be held in the H.O.D. Hall on Wednesday, 28th inst. The entire proceeds will be donated to the lodge benevolent fund. Dancing will be from 8 p.m. to 2 a.m.

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