

# MAGIC OF MASKELYNE

## Memories of the "Father of Magicians"

"I must have seen this show something like four hundred times, and I never tired of it," said L. D. Austin, of Wellington, talking from 2YA last week about his personal memories of the tricks of Maskelyne, the great conjuror.

Some of Maskelyne's most baffling conjuring is described in these extracts from Mr. Austin's talk:

JOHN Nevil Maskelyne was a remarkable man. He was born in Gloucestershire on December 22, 1839, of an old farming family. As a boy he showed extraordinary aptitude for mechanics, and was apprenticed to a watchmaker at Cheltenham. His hobby was conjuring, for which he had a passion, and he was only sixteen when he began giving private shows, helped by another boy named Cooke.

### At a "Spiritualist" Show

Then something happened that put the two lads into a blaze of publicity and settled what their careers were to be. The Davenport Brothers, who claimed to be spiritualistic mediums, were going round England with a show that

purported to be supernatural. They used a skeleton wardrobe fitted with three panel doors and a seat at the back. On this seat were placed a guitar, a violin and bow, a tambourine, and a couple of bells. The Davenport Brothers would be securely tied, hands and feet, and fastened to the bench in the wardrobe. A ghostly light shone on the cabinet and the doors were closed and bolted. Almost immediately spirit hands were seen floating in and out of the cabinet; the violin and the guitar were played; and bells rung. The audience was mystified.

As soon as one performance ended, young Maskelyne jumped up and shouted that he had discovered the secret. When the Davenports' manager challenged him, Maskelyne stood his ground. He undertook to reproduce all the Davenport tricks on a certain date in the same hall, and he would use only mechanical apparatus, and a little dexterity. There wouldn't be anything supernatural in the show at all.

### The Day of Trial

You may imagine what a sensation this caused in Cheltenham that April in 1865. When the day came the hall was

packed. Maskelyne and Cooke brought on to the stage a cabinet like that used by the Davenports, and members of the audience were invited to inspect it. More than a hundred people went on to the platform and examined all the gear carefully. Then both Maskelyne and Cooke were tied inside the cabinet, and a complete job it was, for the tying was done by a sailor. Somebody suggested that the knots on the ropes be sealed, and somebody else had the idea of putting flour into the hands of the performers, so if they opened their hands the flour would be spilled. Both suggestions were adopted.

Then the fun began. The doors of the cabinet were closed. Instantly the musical instruments inside the cabinet began to play, and the bells rang violently. The sounds ceased, the doors were opened, and there sat the young men, still bound, the seals intact, the flour still in their hands. Not a particle of flour had been dropped. One can imagine the excitement. The demonstration was repeated and repeated, and then as a climax, the two young conjurers walked out of the cabinet, quite free of the ropes—though the wax seals remained unbroken—and with the flour still in their hands!

The Davenports went on to the north of England, but were exposed there by Henry Irving, who was to become so famous as an actor. Maskelyne had told Irving the secret.

### Most Famous Trick

Then Maskelyne showed that Cheltenham audience a trick of his own. He brought on to the stage a heavy deal box, three feet long by two feet wide,

and eighteen inches deep. Apparently it was just an ordinary box. It was examined by members of the audience, including carpenters, but they couldn't see anything remarkable in it. Then Maskelyne got into the box, and the lid was shut down and locked. A spectator held the key. Then the box was roped round and round and the knots were sealed. The box was hoisted into the cabinet used for the previous tricks, and the bells placed on the lid. The doors of the cabinet were shut. Almost immediately the bells were heard ringing loudly and when the doors were opened, behold, there sat Maskelyne on top of the box, which was found to be still locked, roped and sealed.

This was the most famous of all Maskelyne's tricks—the box trick. I believe that the secret of it was never entirely discovered. It was known only to Maskelyne and Cooke, and, of course, to one or two others who had to play their parts in the show, but the actual mechanism remained a profound secret, and it died with its inventor.

### Still Going

The entertainment which the Egyptian Hall made famous has been given for many years at St. George's Hall, Langham Palace, next to the Queen's Hall, and it is directed to-day by a Maskelyne, either a son or grandson of my old friend. Many New Zealanders who visit London go there to be entertained. I went along to Piccadilly to look for the site of the famous Egyptian Hall. It is now occupied by a chemist's shop, and there is not even a memorial plaque to that great man, John Nevil Maskelyne.

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