

Charles Dickens

THE UNPARALLELED NECROMANCER!

Part from magic scholars, few magicians are aware that the greatest celebrity of the 19th century, Charles Dickens, was an excellent amateur magician. Dickens was fascinated with magic and performed often at special gatherings of family and friends. Twelfth Night celebrations, Christmas parties and children's birthdays were typical occasions for Dickens to display his conjuring skills.

Shortly after publication of *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, Dickens celebrated by performing a magic show at a large birthday party for the child of one of his good friends, famous Shakespearian actor William Macready. Of the show, Jane Carlyle, in a letter to a friend said, "Only think of that excellent Dickens playing the conjuror for one whole hour, the best conjuror I ever saw (and I have paid money to see several). This part of the entertainment concluded with a plum pudding made out of raw flour, raw eggs, all the usual ingredients, boiled in a gentlemen's hat and tumbled out reeking, all in one minute before the eyes of the astonished children and astonished grown people! That trick and his other, changing ladies' pocket handkerchiefs into conifits, and a box full of bran into a box full of a live guinea pig, would enable him to make a handsome subsistence, let the bookseller trade go as it please."

John Forster, Dickens' close friend and first biographer, who sometimes acted as his assistant, called him "a capital conjuror."

For a good account of exactly what tricks Dickens performed, there exists, thanks to Forster who saved it, a wonderful program written by Dickens for a show in 1849 at Bonchurch. His humorous hyperbole made fun of the fanciful claims made by exotic magicians of this time, but they also described the tricks accurately enough for them to be identified today. Most of these classic effects can be found in Professor Hoffmann's *Modern Magic* and the *Tarbell Course*.

The six tricks in the program were: "Rising Cards," "Marked Coin in Nest of Boxes," "Burnt and Restored Card," "Watch in Loaf of Bread," "Bonus Genius Doll" (found in the

1658 *Hocus Pocus Junior*) and cake baked in rarebit pan.

Other effects performed by Dickens, known from accounts by him or others, include: a guinea pig in a bran box, handkerchiefs that change to candy, jingling coins in a glass that answer questions, and a handkerchief from a wine bottle.

As was customary for 19th century conjurors, Dickens performed most of his tricks with some sort of magical apparatus. In the recent massive biography, *Dickens*, author Peter Ackroyd devotes less than a page to information on Dickens' interest in magic. He concludes by saying, "Experts in such matters, on examining all the available evidence, incline to the belief that Dickens was no more than a competent magician, relying upon simple mechanical tricks of illusion, but that he was an unparalleled 'patterer' as he talked his way through the various sleights of hand."

I believe Ackroyd got his opinion from *The Decoding of Edwin Drood* (listed in his bibliography). Charles Forsyte, the author of this book on Dickens' last novel (uncompleted at his death) is an English mystery writer, Dickens scholar and amateur magician, with whom I've met. While he alluded to Dickens' limited technical skill, he points out that "even with all this apparatus, Dickens

would have needed some adroitness." He further deduces that Dickens was skilled at misdirection.

In looking at the tricks Dickens did and knowing he performed for up to an hour, I would think he must have been a very credible magician enhanced, no doubt, by his flamboyant presentation style and patter.

With the secrets of magic so readily available today from magic shops, by mail order or in public libraries, it's difficult for us to realize how different it was in Dickens' time. Secrets were closely guarded and magic shops were rare.

In a letter to an American friend, Cornelius Felton, Dickens relates, "The best of it is that Forster and I have purchased between us the entire stock in trade of a conjuror, the practice and display whereof is entrusted to me. And oh my dear eyes, Felton, if you could see me conjuring the company's watches into impos-

sible tea caddies, and causing pieces of money to fly, and burning pocket handkerchiefs without hurting 'em and practicing in my own room, without anybody to admire — you would never forget it as long as you live.

It's not known when Dickens first became interested in magic. In *The Great Illusionists*, well-known magic historian Eddie Dawes says, "It has been plausibly argued that Dickens' interest in conjuring was aroused when "Nicholas



Dickens, as the Christmas magician, invokes the Spirit of Christmas [from the *Dickensian*, 1905].

BY DICK NEWTON

Nickleby" was first produced at the Hull Theatre Royal on 26 December 1838, for sharing the program with the Dickens drama was Ramo Samee, the Celebrated East Indian juggler." Dawes also notes that Dickens parodied Ramo Samee and colleagues, such as Khia Khan Khurse, when he

two fields for the *Journal of Magic History*.

Dickens first saw mesmerism at a public exhibition given by Dr. John Elliotson, a distinguished physician at University College Hospital. It impressed him greatly. After the doctor's close involvement with this strange and contro-

versial theory of magnetism led to his departure from the hospital staff, Dickens made Elliotson his family's personal physician.

A few years later, while on his first American tour, Dickens attempted hypnosis himself. Writing to his friend Forster, Dickens recalled, "Kate (his wife) sat down, laughing, for me to try my hand upon her. I had been holding forth upon the subject rather luminously, and asserting that I thought I could exercise the influence, but had never tried, in six minutes, I magnetized her into hysterics, and then into the magnetic sleep."

Dickens continued experimenting with hypnosis, both as entertainment and as treatment therapy for friends suffering from various afflictions.

As to the later fad, spiritualism, Dickens did considerable firsthand investigation of the phenomenon exhib-

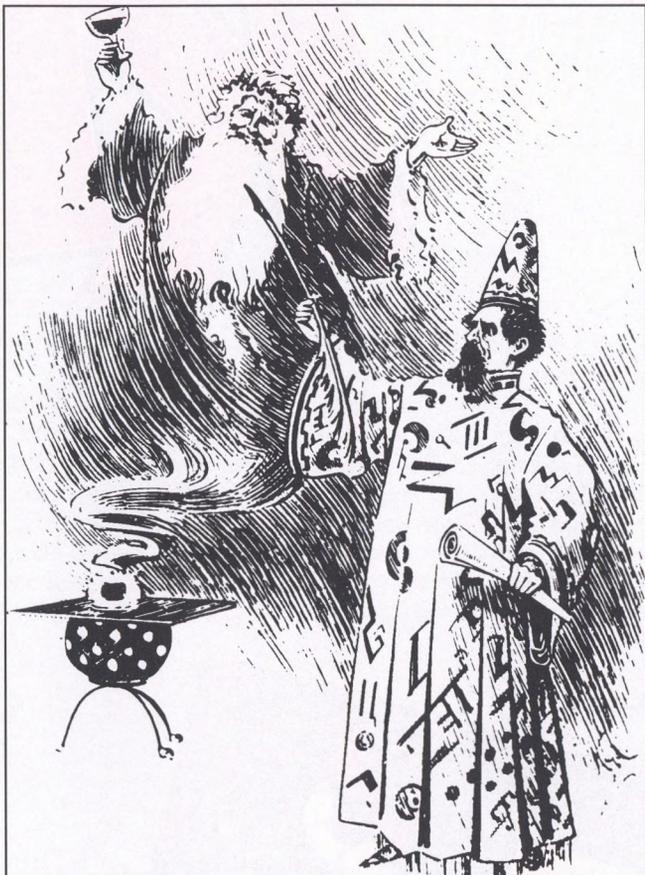
ited by the "spirit rappers" and "table tipplers." As a result, he became one of the first and most articulate debunkers of these charlatans.

In his widely read magazine, *All the Year Round*, Dickens drew on his knowledge of sleight of hand to expose fraudulent mediums. After one visit to a pair of women mediums, he revealed, "There was not one single thing performed that was not an open and palpable deception; yet here were sane, well-educated English men and women grouped, full of faith and belief, around to illiterate conjurors, whose tricks would have been utterly contemptible for the painful amount of human trust and reverence given them. It was so impressibly sad to see how these two wretched women were able to play on the holiest and deepest feelings of their audience; how, for the paltry sum which they gained from each as the price of their deceptions, they mocked the most sacred truths, and cheated the most earnest faith."

Most of what we know about Dickens' magic occurred during his 20s and 30s. In the last two

decades of his life, he was inordinately busy with an exhausting writing schedule, the collapse of his marriage, a long relationship with an actress 27 years younger, and an immensely popular series of reading tours throughout the English-speaking world. Dickens died in 1870 at the age of 58.

During his younger years of unrelieved drudgery as a struggling law clerk, Dickens fell in love with the theatre. He yearned to be on the stage. By his mid-20s he had achieved amazingly swift success as a writer. Shortly after began his fascination with magic. Performing conjuring tricks gave him that chance to be in the spotlight. He reveled in the theatricality of the magic arts. Subsequently, the public readings of his works satisfied his need to perform. But, during those magic years, Charles Dickens was surely one of us. Listen to his words in a letter after one of his performances: "I have made a tremendous hit with a conjuring apparatus and was more popular last evening after cooking a plum pudding in a hat, and producing a pocket handkerchief from a wine bottle, than I have been in my life." ♦

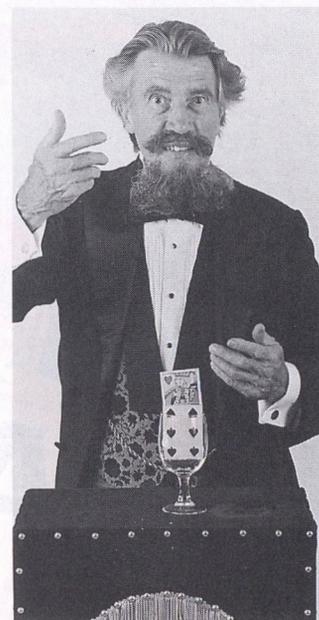


Dickens on one of his reading tours [from the *London Illustrated News*, 1870].

billed himself as "The Unparalleled Necromancer Rhia Rhama Rhoos" in the program for his 1849 Bonchurch performance.

A sensation in 1865 was Colonel Stodare's presentation of the famous "Sphinx" illusion (a disembodied head on table) at Egyptian Hall, England's Home of Mystery. It was billed as the new and marvelous illusion that fooled Dickens, and we have proof that it did. Dickens' daughter, Mary, wrote to her father asking how it was done. He replied that he had "only seen it once and it is so extraordinarily well done that it ought to be observed closely several times." He went on to offer a complicated solution that was incorrect.

Dickens' interest in magic extended to two new baffling phenomena that had great impact in the 19th century. Hypnosis was introduced to Victorian England as mesmerism or animal magnetism. Later, the new American rage, spiritualism, also captured England's imagination. Steven Tigner did extensive research on Dickens' involvement in these



Dick Newton is a professional magician in San Francisco. For the past year, he's been researching Charles Dickens' interest in magic to develop an act in which he portrays Dickens performing a Victorian magic show. While making a brief introduction, Newton puts on beard, mustache and authentic costume, transforming into the character of Dickens in front of the audience. With appropriate accent and Dickensian patter, he performs three of Dickens' tricks: "Rising Cards," "Ring in Nest of Boxes," and "Plum Pudding Baked in Rarebit Pan." One-third of the words in his script are Dickens' own, gleaned from the Bonchurch program and Dickens' writings and letters. San Francisco magician/director/lactor Ken Sonkin helped with the direction.