



ROBERT HOUDIN.

FATHER OF MODERN MAGIC.

ROBERT HOUDIN was born on the 6th of December, 1805, in the town of Blois, France. His father a watchmaker in that city gave him a good education at the college of Orleans, with the idea of making him a professional man, a solicitor by preference; but Houdin was averse to this, having inherited his father's mechanical genius he wished to follow in his footsteps. To this his father would not listen, and forthwith bound him to a country solicitor, where he served two years, at the end of which time he was discharged having spent most of his time in constructing ingenious mechanical contrivances. His father at last despairing of making anything of him except that which nature designed, consented to his following his own bent, much to his son's joy. He was sent to a relative at a distant town to learn the watchmaking trade. While there, by the merest chance a treatise on conjuring fell into his hands that so charmed and fascinated him that he became averse to following his father's trade, his sole ambition being to become a conjurer; chance at this time throwing him into the company of a professional conjurer strengthened this ambition, but circumstances compelled him to stick to his trade, nevertheless he found time not only to perfect himself in sleight of hand, but to construct new mechanical tricks which he fondly hoped to exhibit some day. So great was his ingenuity, that at the Paris Exhibition of 1844, he was awarded a medal for the ingenious construction of several automata. In 1845, Houdin had the good fortune to render a great service to a nobleman of considerable wealth, who in a spirit of gratitude pressed upon him the loan of sufficient money to enable him to open a small theatre in the Palais Royal, Paris. It was here that Houdin made reforms that entitles him to be called the Father of Modern Magic. The contemporary performers of his time dressed like astrologers, in long and flowing robes, embroidered with hieroglyphic characters, and pointed cap, or in a mountebank costume with short sleeves

and bare arms. Houdin appeared on the stage in ordinary "evening dress," substituting undraped gilt tables and consoles in the Louis XV. style in place of the cumbersome long draped tables of his predecessors. The enormous metal covers under which articles to be vanished had hitherto been placed, were replaced with covers of glass, opaque or transparent as occasion required; boxes with false bottoms and all apparatus of brass or tin were completely banished from his stage. At his entertainments, which were given under the title *Soirees Fantastiques*, the originator exhibited certain illusions which not only by reason of the manner of their working, but of the principles whereon they were based,



inaugurated a new era of conjuring, these were the *Second Sight*, the *Aerial Suspension*, the *Inexhaustible Bottle*, the *Mysterious Portfolio*, the *Crystal Cash-box*, the *Wonderful Orange-tree*, etc., including several pieces of *Automata*.

The *Soirees Fantastiques* proved a complete success and soon the little theatre was nightly crowded with the first circles of Parisian society; though the number of seats were limited to two hundred, the prices were tolerably high, so that Robert Houdin, thanks to the signal favor with which his performances were received by the public, was enabled to repay his generous creditor within a year after the opening of his theatre. He continued to enjoy uninterrupted success until 1848, when the revolution ruined all theatrical speculations in Paris, he then visited London, where his performances at the St. James' Theatre were universally attractive and lucrative; leaving London he made a tour through Great Britain

with equal success, returning to Paris when France had settled down quietly under the rule of a President; he subsequently visited many other parts of Europe and was everywhere received with distinction and applause.

In 1852 finding his health failing he determined to retire, to his great regret his two sons upon whom he had reckoned to fill his place evinced from an early age, inclinations of a different character to those he had hoped. The elder, yielding doubtless to an hereditary predisposition, developed

(Continued on page 2.)