



Greetings and welcome to e-news #31, September 2026

Much of my summer has been happily spent with Dante and Harry Hemsley. You'll find them both in this newsletter.

Not everyone is a fan of Houdini, but 2026 is the centenary of his death and it seems appropriate to share a personalised photograph of him.

Houdini



The photograph is from the La Pine studio in Seattle. Houdini's message to Devant reads:
To my good friend David Devant. May my portrait always conjure up pleasant thoughts of your admirer. Harry Houdini April 15/1920.

Item [N3786](#)

Outdoor stunts at the early International Brotherhood of Magicians British Ring conventions



The British Ring held its first annual convention in Cheltenham in 1931. It wasn't long before the Ring realized that outside stunts brought good publicity for its public shows. Unfortunately health and safety regulations tightened as the decades went by and insurance costs sky rocketed. Outside stunts became rare.

The 1930s saw many Ring stunts which created worthwhile publicity. The Davenport family filmed four of them.

1933 George Blake's escape from a strait jacket

This film captures George Blake's upside down strait jacket escape in Northampton. The convention programme tells us that on Friday 23 June "George Blake will attempt to escape from a regulation strait jacket whilst suspended from the derrick of a break-down van." The idea had been to parade the van around the town with George Blake suspended upside down from the derrick. However this was not a safe option because his head was too close to the road. Instead, he accomplished his escape while the van was parked. Item [N3750](#).

1938 Esmé Levante's underwater escape

The escape was staged at a swimming pool in Malvern. Esmé's father Les Levante (The Great Levante) oversaw the proceedings. Item [N2660](#).

1938 Les Levante's upside down strait jacket escape

A huge crowd was able to watch this escape because Les was suspended from the roof of the Festival Theatre, giving everyone a good view. Item [N2659](#).

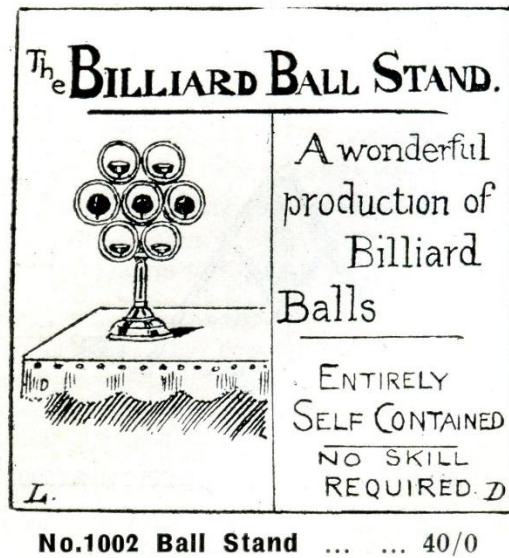
The 1938 Malvern convention garnered good publicity for the Ring, not least through a Gaumont British News film *Mysteries of the Magicians' Convention*. Item [N3106](#).



1939 Oswald Rae's blindfold walk

The 1939 convention was in Southport. Take a look at the film to find out what a blindfold walk is, and how it can be both interesting and mysterious. Item [N3745](#).

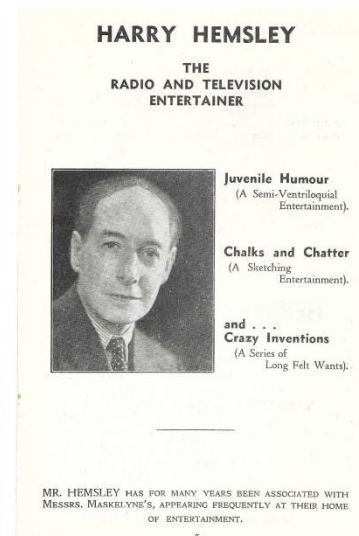
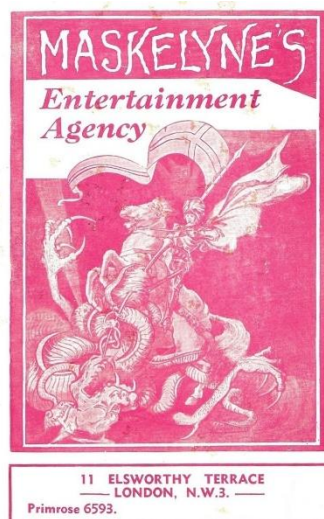
Nickel plated billiard ball stand



In the late 19th century metal stage apparatus was generally made out of brass, or tinplate decorated with lacquer. Nickel plating was available by then, but it wasn't until the early 20th century that its use for magicians' props became commonplace. In those days stage lighting was not as bright as it is today. Nickel plating provided a bright, scratch resistant finish which sparkled in the relatively dim stage lights of the time. Nickel plating reigned supreme until chrome plating came along at the end of the 1920s.

Nickel plated apparatus was never cheap. This billiard ball stand allowed the magician to produce seven billiard balls. It was probably made by the German dealer Bartl, from whom Davenports bought a great deal of nickeled apparatus. Davenports sold it for 40 shillings (£2) which sounds ridiculously cheap today. In the 1920s it amounted to about a week's wages for an unskilled labourer. Item [N50](#).

The skills and voices of Harry Hemsley



The photograph on the left is from a 1920s Maskelyne's Theatre programme. On the right is an older Hemsley from a mid-1930s Maskelyne's Entertainment Agency brochure. It describes his entertainments as:

- Juvenile Humour (semi-ventriloquial in which he impersonated children)
- Chalks and Chatter (a sketching entertainment, probably lightning cartoons)
- Crazy Inventions (a series of long felt wants)

He was best known as a child impersonator on stage, radio, and television. He had an imaginary family of four children: Johnny, Elsie, Winnie and Horace. His mimicry was so good that some radio listeners thought the children were real. Horace spoke baby-gibberish and only Winnie could understand him. Hemsley would ask, “*What does Horace say, Winnie?*” and this became his catchphrase.

Hemsley began his radio career with the BBC in the 1920s. For five years from December 1934 he starred in the Ovaltine’s Concert Party on Radio Luxembourg.

Harry Hemsley’s book, *Horace and the BBC*, was printed and published in 1947 by Raphael Tuck & Sons Ltd. It captures Horace causing havoc at the BBC. The book cover and an example page are shown below, beautifully showcasing Hemsley’s humour and drawing skill. Item [N3757](#).

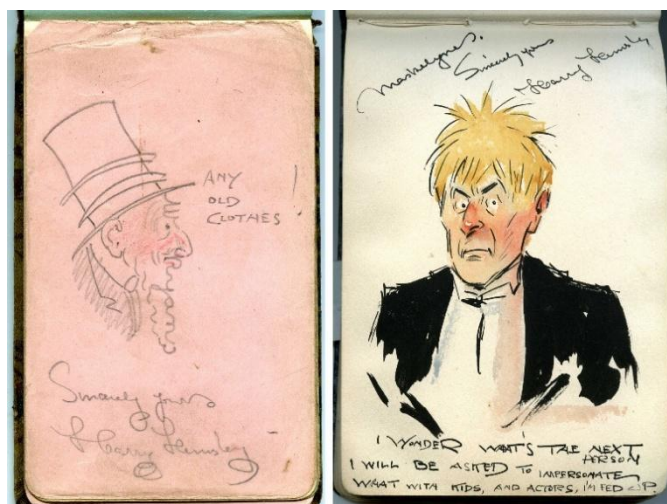


In later years Hemsley adapted his performances for television. At the time of his death in 1951, at the age of 73, he was under contract to appear in the BBC programme *Children’s Hour*. In the course of his career he made numerous records and you can listen to some of them on the internet.

Hemsley produced designs and artwork for David Devant. He also worked with Oswald Williams at Maskelyne’s Theatre, providing assistance with illusions and supplying crazy inventions. Hemsley included some of his crazy inventions in his book *Harry Hemsley’s Stories for Children*. For example, a visitor who comes to the inventor’s house comments on the strange door which has two letter-boxes in it. The inventor replies:

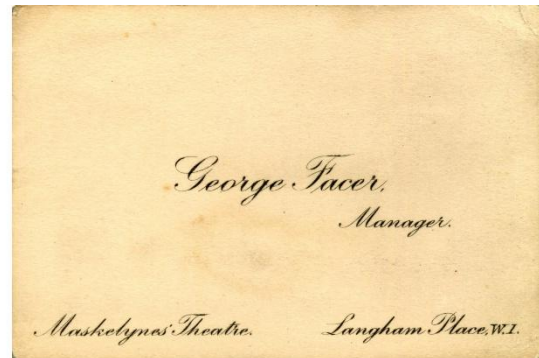
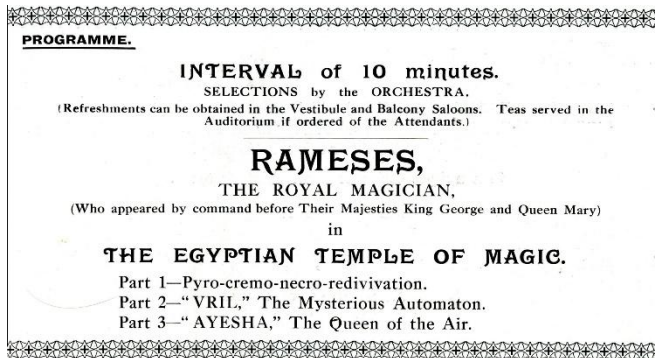
“Oh, it is very useful, especially for those people who are pestered like I am with circulars and bills. As fast as the postman puts letters in one of the boxes, they come out again through the other, so you never receive them.”

When Lewis Davenport was performing at theatres in the 1920s and 1930s his daughter Wyn was a keen autograph collector. Her autograph albums survive in the Davenport Collection and include two pages by Hemsley. The one on the right shows the trouble he was willing to take to produce a unique page. The one on the left is a pencil drawing which includes Wyn’s autograph, W. Ryan, hidden in the man’s beard. Wyn used her real surname, Ryan, rather than her father’s professional name, Davenport.



For more Harry Hemsley items click [here](#).

Rameses, George Facer and fried fish



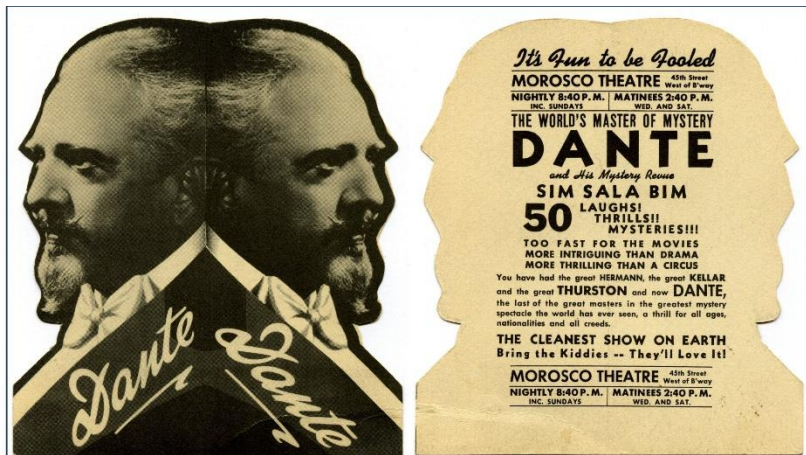
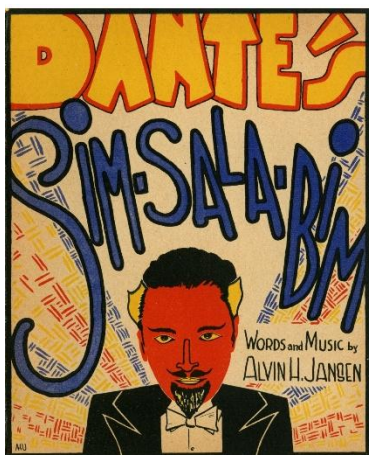
Rameses (real name Albert Marchinski) is a name not often heard these days. In his day he was a respected act with a sizeable show which he performed in top theatres. His story has been captured in Chris Woodward's book *Rameses the Forgotten Star* published by Squash Publishing in 2011.

During his career Rameses performed at Maskelyne's Theatre in London (above, left), where the manager was George Facer. When Chris wrote his book, I did not realise that the Davenport Collection held a letter from Facer to Lewis and Mrs Davenport which mentioned Rameses. Had I known, I would have shared this quirky story with Chris:

"Thanks for the information re Rameses. Some chap up north wanted to know about his act and for the life of me all I could remember was his Flying Lady illusion which impressed me as being the best I had seen.

Funnily enough I also remember that when he was at the Hall he insisted that only his wife knew how to fry fish and one night he brought me a large plateful to take home. It really was good. I found him a very agreeable and pleasant personality and, so far as his act was concerned, I was surprised I had not known it earlier. He had a successful run at St. George's."

Dante the Magician



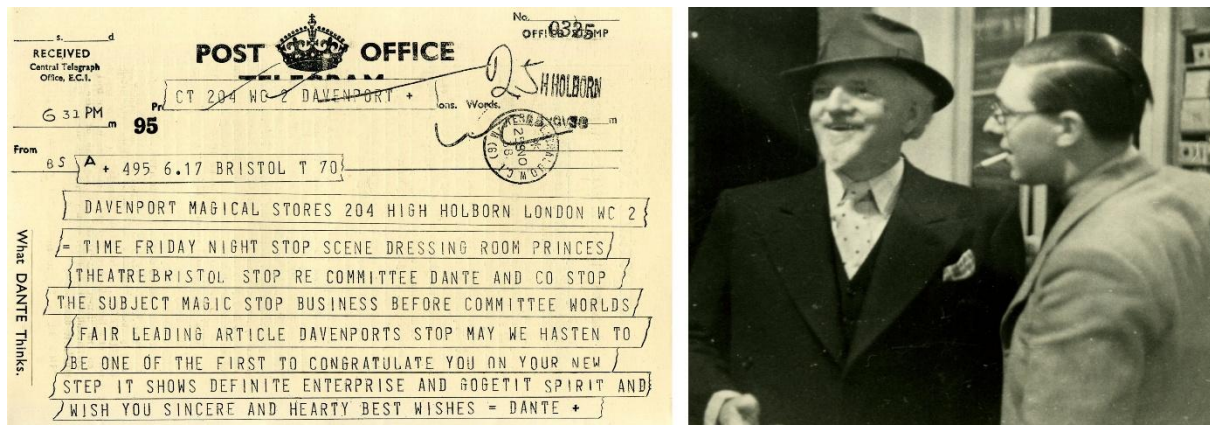
Dante (Harry August Jansen 1883-1955) rose to the top of his profession and toured a big show around the world. The size and quality of his show, and his own showmanship, made a huge impression when he first came to London in 1936. Sim-Sala-Bim, the magic phrase he used, became well known.

Plenty of Dante ephemera is still around, and much has been photographed and included in the books written about his life. I've shown two which particularly appeal to me. On the left is a card. Inside you find the words and music of Dante's Sim-Sala-Bim Fox Trot. But the surprise is that the piece is called Danteho Sim-Sala-Bim. The explanation is simple: the item was printed in the Czech language in Czechoslovakia in 1931. *Danteho* is Czech for *Dante's*. Item [N3788](#).

The item on the right is a card advertising Dante at the Morosco Theatre. When folded in half it stands up like a greetings card 110mm high. When Dante returned from touring abroad, he opened at the Morosco Theatre on Broadway in September 1940. Item [N3793](#).



An unusual Dante item is shown on the left above. It is a cardboard mat from the Hollywood Mat Syndicate. In the mid-20th century, in the era of letterpress printing, small local newspapers relied on syndicates like Hollywood Mat. Instead of setting type or engraving images locally, newspapers would buy lightweight papier-mâché or cardboard “mats” through the mail and pour molten lead over them to create their printing plates. The photograph on the left is the mat, photographed in direct light. The image on it is barely discernible. If the mat is photographed in glancing light, as in the centre photograph, it is easier to see the image. It is a well-known portrait of Dante, as shown in the photograph on the right. Item [N3790](#).



When Dante was in England he visited Davenports shop. The photograph on the right shows him with Gus Davenport. Other photographs were also taken – see Item [N3796](#).

On the left above is Dante's 1938 telegram congratulating Davenports on their go-get-it spirit. This was prompted by the announcement of the family's new shop, opened in December 1938 at 39/41 New Oxford Street, London. Upstairs was the Demon Club, a new venture for the benefit of their customers and club members. Dante had sent the telegram to 204 High Holborn, the shop Davenports were vacating.

For more Dante items click [here](#).

All good wishes

John Davenport, curator of www.davenportcollection.co.uk

Copyright © 2026 Davenport Collection. All rights reserved.

[Davenport Film Collection](#)

[Davenport Collection on Instagram](#)

[Earlier editions of e-news](#)