



Kellar the Magician

Born: *Heinrich Keller* (July 11, 1849) in Erie, Pennsylvania, U.S.

Died: March 10, 1922 in Los Angeles, California, U.S. at age 72

◆ How He Became a Magician

Kellar ran away from home as a boy and began traveling, eventually entering the world of performance.

Between ages **12 and 18**, he learned magic while working as an **assistant to established magicians like Isaiah Hughes (the “Fakir of Ava”)** and later the Davenport Brothers, where he picked up stagecraft and illusion techniques.

◆ Influences

- **Isaiah Hughes (“Fakir of Ava”)** — early mentor who introduced him to exotic magic presentation styles.
- **The Davenport Brothers** — spiritualist illusion performers who influenced his technique and showmanship.
- European magicians such as **Buatier de Kolta** inspired particular illusions (e.g., *Vanishing Birdcage*).

Kellar blended influences from older spiritualist shows with traditional conjuring to create highly theatrical stage presentations.

◆ What Type of Magic He Did

Kellar was a **stage illusionist** known for **large, theatrical magic shows** with elaborate props and dramatic presentation. His repertoire included:

- **Levitation of Princess Karnac** — a floating woman illusion that became a signature.
- **Vanishing Birdcage** and **Vanishing Lamp** — classic visual effects.
- **Spirit cabinet** and other mystical illusions designed to evoke spiritual mysteries.

Kellar's strength lay not only in tricks but in *showmanship and production values* — audiences saw seamless spectacle rather than just sleight-of-hand.

◆ Performance Career Span

- Kellar began performing magic professionally in the **1870s** after apprenticing and touring early in life.
- In **1884** he opened his first full evening stage show in the U.S., establishing himself as a headliner.
- Following the death of Alexander Herrmann in **1896**, Kellar became America's *most popular magician*.
- He **retired in 1908**, publicly passing the mantle to **Howard Thurston**.
Career span: roughly *the early 1870s through 1908* with occasional special appearances afterward (including a benefit performance in 1917).

◆ How He Died

Kellar **died on March 10, 1922** in Los Angeles from a **pulmonary hemorrhage related to influenza**. He was widely mourned as the "*Dean of American Magicians*" and is buried at **Angelus-Rosedale Cemetery** in Los Angeles.

Kellar was one of the early pioneers who popularized **large-scale illusion shows** in the United States and helped establish the modern touring magic production. He influenced generations of magicians, including Harry Houdini, who became a close friend and admirer in Kellar's later years.



Signature Tricks, Illusions & Show Elements

1. *The Levitation of Princess Karnac*

Kellar's *signature* illusion: a woman introduced as a Hindu princess appears to **float unsupported in mid-air**, and a large hoop is passed completely around her body to show no visible supports. This became known as his *crowning achievement* and was one of the most iconic levitation effects of the era.

2. *The Nested Boxes*

In this elaborate routine, Kellar borrows **six audience members' finger rings**, fires them (secretly) into a chest, then opens a series of nested boxes inside it. Five rings are found tied inside roses, but one is missing — until later it's produced on a sash carried by a guinea pig (or revealed as a bouquet).

3. *The Vanishing Lamp*

A glowing lamp placed on a glass table is **covered with a cloth and then seemingly vanishes** at the strike of a bell and a dramatic gunshot gesture, making it disappear into thin air.



Signature Tricks, Illusions & Show Elements

4. *Vanishing Birdcage*

Borrowed from famed French magician Buatier de Kolta early in his career, Kellar's version of the **vanishing birdcage** — where a birdcage disappears instantly from view — was a popular visual effect in his shows.

5. *Automaton “Psycho”*

Kellar featured a mechanical illusion in which exotic **automata** appeared to perform tasks or respond — a popular attraction that showed off technical ingenuity as well as mystique.

6. *Spirit Cabinet & Séance-Style Effects*

Using conventions borrowed from spiritualist performances (à la the Davenport Brothers), Kellar presented **spirit cabinet effects** where mysterious actions happened inside a cabinet, evoking paranormal themes as part of his theatrical staging.

These illusions reflect Kellar's emphasis on **large-scale stage magic, theatrical presentation, mechanical ingenuity, and visual spectacle** — traits that earned him the title “Dean of American Magicians” and influenced many performers who came after him.