MAGIC LANTERN DAYS

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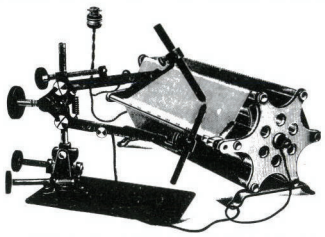

In my boyhood days the Magic Lantern was always an attraction for me as with many other youngsters of my generation. The Band of Hope had a packed hall when it was a Magic Lantern or Lime-Light Lecture, as it was sometimes called, and gas cylinders with rubber tubes attached were in the operation. I recollect the happy evenings when I went with my mother to the Saturday night Temperance Tea Meetings held in the local Baptist Church Mission Hall which cost 2d to enter entitling you to a bag containing two buns and also a mug of tea, closing with a lantern lecture depicting the ravages and downward moral trend of 'drink', a situation prevailing in many homes at the time. When I eased my way into becoming a 'worker', I was deliriously delighted by handing hymn books to the people entering or giving out mugs and especially that position of trust for a boy like me of even dispensing the bags with buns. But of much more importance and enjoyment to me was the erecting and dismantling of the screen before and after the meeting. Unlike the present-day small screen, this was six yards square and was attached to the necessary poles, metal sleeves and angle joints by means of tapes every yard or so. All were kept in appropriate drawers underneath the platform which was about twenty inches high and a convenient depth to store these requisites. However, as an inquisitive boy, my supreme interest lay in the operating of the lantern and I stared with wide open eyes as the projectionist brought the wooden box containing it from the cupboard, then gently easing it out and placing it on its stand.

Illumination was by two parallel carbons nine inches long, one being thicker than the other indicating the pole of each erected on a flat metal base which fitted into side slots in the lantern for stabilisation. The carbons were fitted into a carrier and by turning the appropriate knob clockwise both were advanced to keep focus as they burned. I can still picture the octagonal resistance-coil about twelve or fourteen inches long with a probable diameter of six inches, wires and frame being quite openly exposed! To ignite, tips of both carbons were touched with another carbon and the arc flustered for a moment or so before settling. There were two lenses, one in front of the slide carrier which held two concave five-inch glasses touching convexly within a brass sleeve mounting, and one at the front also having dual glasses in a brass sleeve, used to focus by means of a telescopic motion operated by a bogey-wheel adjustment. It was a constant worry when one carbon burned quicker than the other and it was not unusual for the side door of the lantern to be opened, lighting up one side of the hall and a pair of pliers used to cut off the end of one carbon to regularise the parallelism. This I may say sometimes happened at the most inappropriate moment or perhaps the carbons would snuff out causing confusion to the lecturer. Fortunately, when I took over as projectionist or lantern operator, as the person was then called, I discovered that by reversing the wires leading to the resistance-coil, the carbons behaved in the proper manner and I was trouble-free in this respect. One thing still sticks in my mind and that was the ghostly apparition of the operator's blue face when he opened the peep-hole on the door of the lantern to see how the carbons were burning. He reminded me of one of the witches portrayed in Robbie Burns' 'Tam O'Shanter'. Of course mistakes were made, slides upside down and doors on the left-hand on one slide appeared on the right later on in the story. The slide carrier was of the retractable type and sometimes when the paper edging on the slide became frayed the carrier stuck and the resultant composite picture caused amusement to the audience but panic to the operator. While I enjoyed showing a good story – John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* shown in sequence over several Saturday nights comes to mind – I felt at my best as an operator when showing a hymn with several verses of four lines, a slide for each verse and one for the chorus. Had there been a championship for dexterity in handling slides thus projected, I would have entered the lists. Slides were precious and putting a card or piece of paper between them in the box was a good idea and preserved the binding tape.

The Band of Hope Union, City Missions and private hirers all had boxes of slides available, with the story in print enclosed, and these could be had for 1/- per night. It was a pity to find broken slides when operating and to avoid dropping a slide I always held the slide carrier steady with my left hand while manipulating the slide with my right as a necessary precaution.