

A SKETCH FROM THE TOWN

The Town was a distinctly scandalous publication of the 1830s and '40s, edited by 'Baron' Renton Nicholson, who presided over the 'Judge and Jury' shows at the Coal Hole in the Strand, forerunners of the music hall. The bawdy poems, dirty jokes and reports of sexual scandals published in the magazine are still startling today. However, in this improbable context, in the issue dated Saturday 28 December 1839, appeared a fascinating essay on the magic lantern.

The article is revealing about certain aspects of lantern entertainments at the end of the 1840s. One is the survival of itinerant 'galanty show-men' and the habit of engaging them for entertainments in middle-class homes, even though they are clearly seen as disreputable and even unclean. Already, though, we discover signs that the lantern is regarded as a somewhat old-fashioned entertainment, being supplanted by other parlour activities: the piano was just entering upon its huge Victorian vogue.

The description of the various characters moving across the screen – the royal couple 'totter'; the Lord Mayor 'slides' – clearly indicates that showmen drew their panoramic slides slowly through the lantern to give a suggestion of ambulation to the figures on the screen. The description of the 'bull's eye' indicates that the screen image was circular.

CHARACTERISTIC SKETCHES. No. CXXXV

Magician of our childish days,
Right glad we are to see you here;
We'll tune our harp unto thy praise,
And welcome at this time of year.

'Ah, Ah, good *Town*, the people now
Are getting vot ve call fastidious;
And little gals kick up a row,
And calls our prime illusions hideous.

'My organ vonce accompanied me
To every scene, its barrel humming;
But now, alack-a-daisy me,
Vy all the gals are frond of *strumming*.

'The grand piano's all the go;
And, for to prove the parent's folly,
They banishes the *glantee* show,
To sing about all "Nix, my dolly!"'

Christmas brings with it its joys for the old, and its merriment for the young. Our antdiluvians, at this period, revel in the glories of old part and rum-punch; the juveniles gorge plum-pudding and mince-pies, and look forward, with infinite delight, for the appearance of that domestic magician, the galanty showman, a personage so ably represented in our cut. The individual who cannot mix, with pleasure, in the pastimes of *youth*, must be a sorry specimen of humanity. For our own parts, the organ of *philo-progenitiveness* is so developed on our sponce, that we are seldom happy without the company of children. The joyous laugh, the fleet and bounding step, and the rollicking rhodomontade, accompanying the revels of the rising generation, are at all times, to us, sources of infinite amusement and pleasure. There is no spectacle, perhaps, so interesting to the young, as the galanty show. It is an exhibition, in their esteem, partly comic, partly tragic; the showman himself is looked upon as a kind of necromancer, a being on the earth, but not of it; a diviner, an astrologer, a soothsayer – in fine a miracle-working being. The appearance of the worthy, however, is *mundane* enough. If it be conceded that he has an occasional intimacy with the inhabitants of other orbs or the power intermittingly of *disorganising* the course of nature, it must be also conceded that he takes little pains in looking like a magician or a wizard; his costume is, unquestionably, from the earthly mansions of Field-lane, or the purlieus of Monmouth-street; his boots are Northampton, and his prophetic hands distinctly dirty. A creature of his order frequently forms a striking contrast to



the elegance of the apartments in the which he exhibits his art; nor is his personal dignity enhanced by the white sheet, that forms a kind of background to his striking 'full-length'. Our *infantry*, as Mr. Hood has it, keep a respectful distance from the worthy of whom we speak, he approaches too closely to the 'man with the sack', 'old Bogie', and a similar class of personages, that nurses and mothers have foolishly identified with terrors, to be an object of interest in their esteem. The performance, to be at all effective, is performed in a dark room. The young ones cluster and cling together, and, on the tip-toe of expectation, are half-pleased, and half-frightened. The exhibition opens most loyally – the Queen and Prince Albert totter, in silent majest', along the scene. 'Oh, how pretty!' comes from twenty voices at once. A slight pause ensues, and an old woman, with a crutch-stick, after the figure of Mother Birch, next makes her *debut*. Boisterous laughter accompanies her progression, which is suddenly checked by the approach of his satanic majesty, with an extra complement of tail. The children cling closer together, and allow the devil to move off, in breathless silence. Fun is again in the ascendant, by the appearance of Harlequin, Columbine and Clown. The merriment is excessive – laughter is at a premium. The exhibitor flatters himself by a voluntary *encore*. Then cometh Nelson, with his rayless eye and his armless sleeve; he is quickly followed by the Duke, who is represented with a drawn sword, on a Welsh pony. The Lord Mayor then slides over the surface of the bull's-eye, in all the majesty of ermined robes. He is his own mace-bearer, and carries it valiantly. 'Pull, devil, pull, baker,' succeeds his lordship, causing the room to ring with plaudits and laughter. The exhibition of this entertainment is somewhat favourable to the *amative* doings of children of a larger growth. Young Thompson takes Miss Maria Smith round the waist, and Master Brown is decidedly saluting Miss Ann Green, while old Muggins is interestingly employed in patting the snow-white back of Miss Betty Black. As we have, in another part of our paper, devoted a space to the doings of Christmas, we shall wind up our notice of the galanty showman, wishing him all the success that his Christmas entertainment deserves.