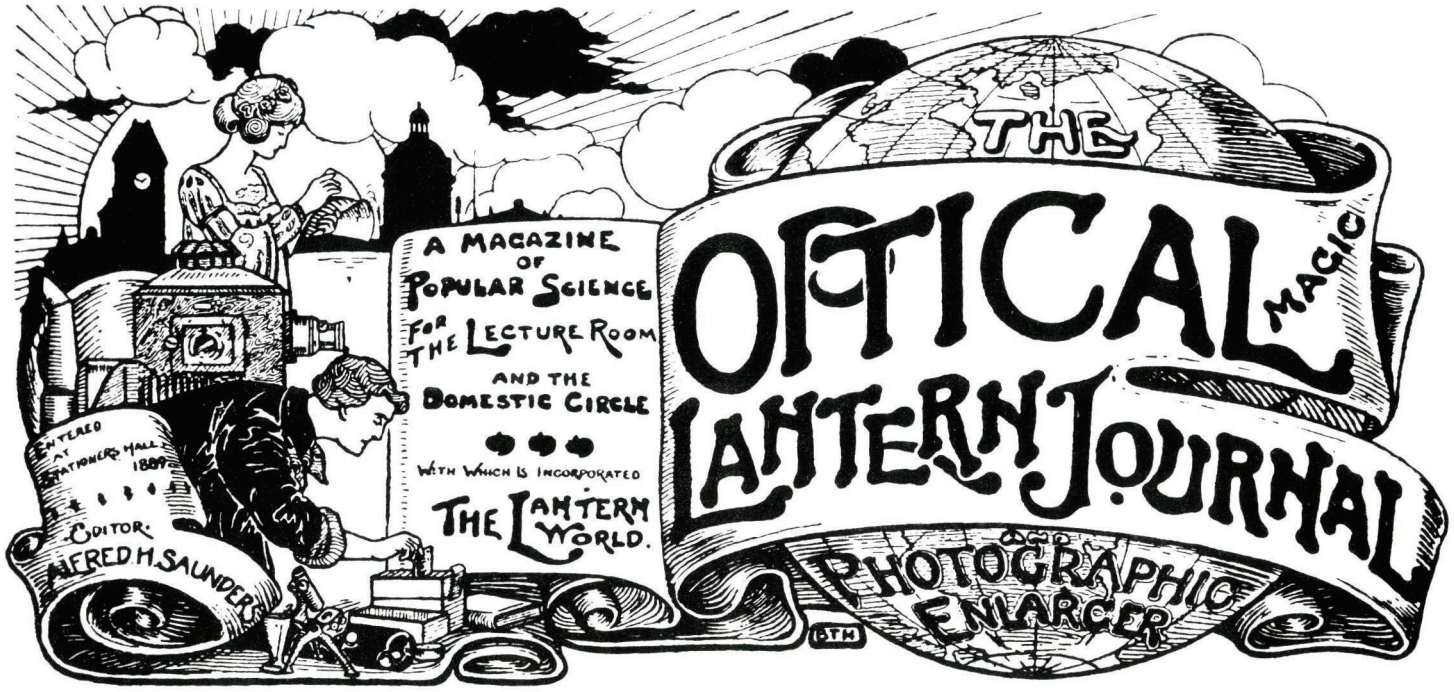

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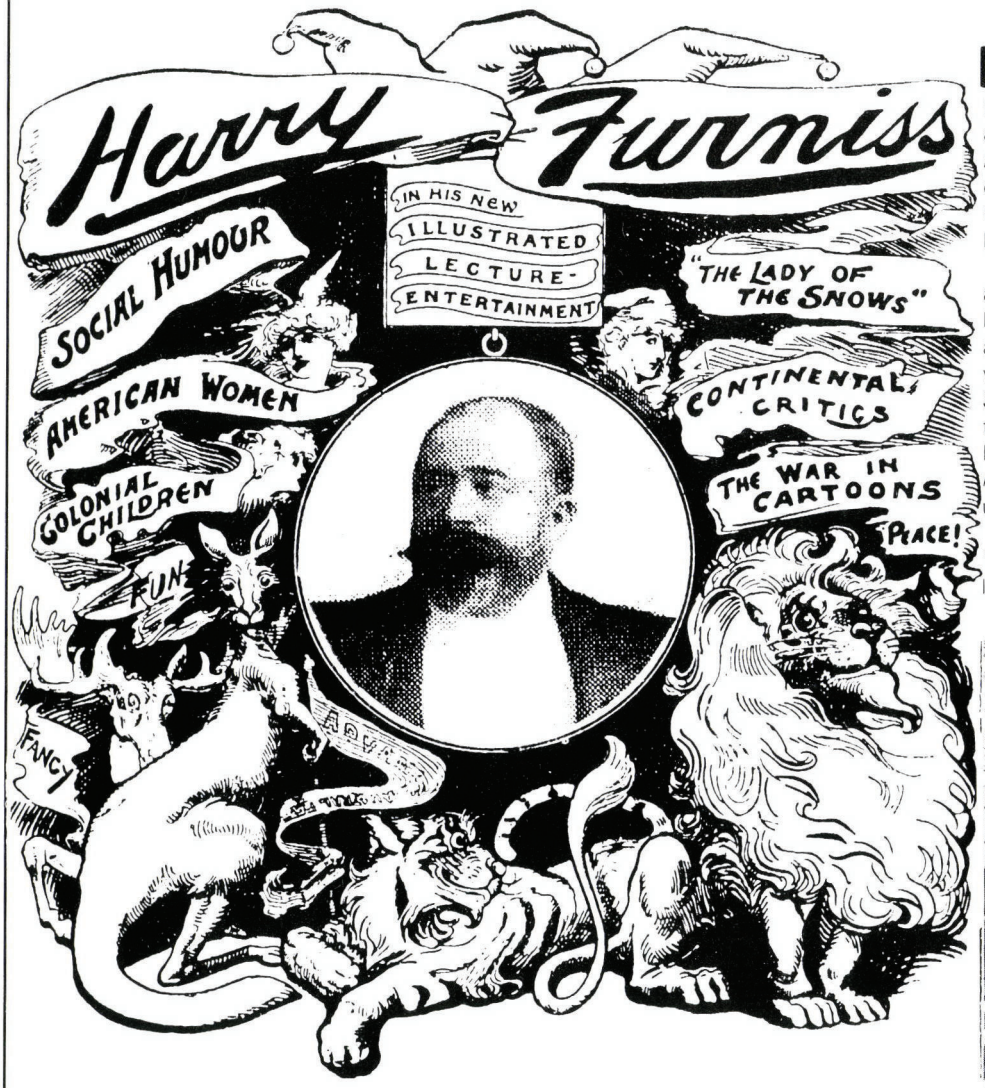
HARRY FURNISS - LANTERN SHOWMAN

DAVID ROBINSON

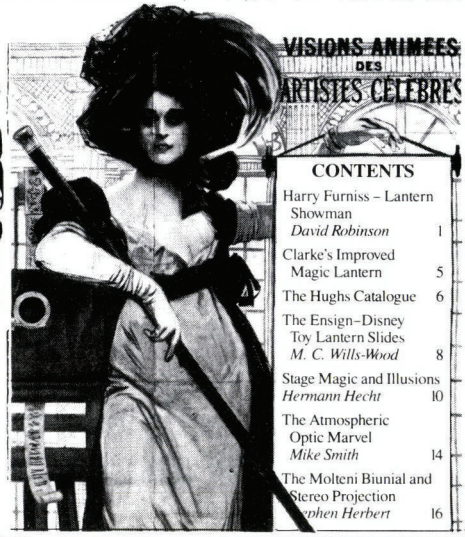


WHERE THE LAUGH CAME IN.

Harry Furniss was one of the best known illustrators of the late Victorian era, famous for his *Punch* caricatures, his illustrations to Dickens and Thackeray, and his contributions to *The Illustrated London News*. One aspect of his career has been forgotten, however. Harry Furniss was also a popular and successful lantern entertainer.

He was born in Wexford in 1854 and showed an early skill for drawing, though he was to have little formal training. At 19 he went to London and began his career as a professional illustrator, working for *London Society* and *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*. In 1876 he joined the regular staff of *The Illustrated London News*. In 1880 his caricatures first began to appear in *Punch*, for which he continued to work regularly until his eventual resignation in 1894.

Furniss discovered his talent as a lecturer in 1888. Quite soon after this he introduced a lantern into his repertory; and in 1891 he first



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performed his most popular lecture, 'Humours of Parliament', inspired by his illustrations to the weekly Parliamentary column in *Punch*.

The screen was to have a lasting fascination for him. In 1912, at the age of 58, he took up the cinema, working for Thomas Edison in New York, as writer, actor and producer. In 1913 he returned to London and set up as a film producer in his own right. Rachel Low tells us in *The History of the British Film*:

> Though English himself, Furniss had lived some years in America and came back to this country as a member of an Edison company which included Marc McDermot and Miriam Nesbit as stars, and Charles J. Brabin as producer . . . Furniss left Edison early in 1913. No firm could be strong enough to incorporate his ideas and energy, and he went into business on his own, turning East Cliff House in Hastings into a studio.

The following year he published a book of reflections on the film, *Our Lady Cinema*. As a film-maker he was a character of great energy and independent ideas. He was a trenchant critic of the newly formed film censorship board, and had progressive theories on the visual qualities of film: **'One must not lose sight of the fact that to write plots for picture plays is essentially work for an artist rather than for an author or dramatist, for the artist sees and thinks in pictures.'**

At the beginning of the First World War Furniss personally directed several animated propaganda films. He continued to work with undiminished energy until his death in 1925.

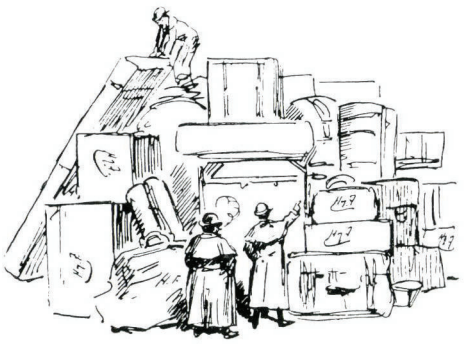
The subjects of his successive lantern lectures were 'Art and Artists' (1888), 'Portraiture Past and Present' and 'Humours of Parliament' (1891), 'America in a Hurry' (1896), and 'Peace With Honour'. In his 1902 lecture 'Comedy in Charcoal', he finally dispensed with the lantern.

Furniss recorded some of his adventures as a lantern-lecturer in his various books of reminiscence and reflection. They tend to be excessively jocular, though they are often lively records of Furniss's huge number of acquaintances among the leading personalities of his time. The following passages, which recount some of the misadventures of this Victorian lanternist, are extracted from 'Flying Visits' (1892), 'Confessions of a Caricaturist' (1901), and 'Harry Furniss at Home' (1904). Particularly interesting is the firm distinction Furniss makes between the roles of 'lecturer' and 'entertainer', both of which he essayed in his lantern career.

THE HUMOURS OF PARLIAMENT *on Tour*

My dear M.,

We are off at last on tour with 'The Humours of Parliament'. Leaving Euston by the Irish Mail, I was rather disappointed to find that Mr Gladstone, Sir William Harcourt, Sir Richard Temple and Mr Joseph Chamberlain had only sent representatives to see me off, as I had a neat little speech ready with which to address them, à la Gladstone, from the carriage window . . . It rather amused me to read in the papers that 'Harry Furniss has packed his portmanteau and is off on tour.' Portmanteau indeed! You might as well say that Irving was taking his costume basket with him, Miss Terry her handbag, or George Grossmith a musical box. I believe that Mr Irving takes a train with sixteen carriages, and of course George Grossmith's piano is a necessity. I only wish that I could have got the fifth part of my luggage into the space of an ordinary luggage van. Just look! You can judge for



yourself. The boxes above contain my elaborate paraphernalia, a complete fit-up and a triple reflex combination self-acting double-riveted 400 horse-power lantern, a patent collapsing up-to-date air-tight and rain-proof studio, and a new elastic-sided electro-plated writing-case, jewelled in four places; indeed, so elaborate were my belongings that the stationmaster, who was of an inquisitive turn of mind, and who happened to know that I was going on tour with my show, thought that I had got most of the Members hid away among my baggage, and that I was going to exhibit them after the fashion of a menagerie . . . Mac, my secretary, travels with me, and I am accompanied as well by Professor C–, *facile princeps* in the art of manipulating the lantern; and apart from this he is a veritable Mark Tapley. From his aspect you might take him for a High Church parson, but there is a quiet gleam in his eye which betokens the innate sense of humour he possesses . . . I must confess that I am a little nervous about this my debut in the provinces as an independent entertainer. As you know, I have lectured a good deal in the country; but then a lecturer's audience is always assured beforehand, as he is engaged by some Society or Institute; but now that I have given up trying to make people wise, and endeavour instead to make them merry – in other words, now that I have abandoned lecturing in favour of entertaining – it is a different matter, as I appeal direct to the public; and I am told that a London success, however great, counts for very little in the country . . . Best wishes,

Yours, etc.,
Hy. F.

P.S. Some people still stick to the idea that I am a lecturer; an idea I am trying to eradicate as soon as possible. I am at present engaged in mortal combat with the fiend Dryasdust.

Arriving in Llandudno in a heat wave, Furness had very poor audiences, and pondered wither next time he would give his entertainment from the door of a bathing machine on the beach. In Scarborough, during the course of the tour, his assistant, 'The Professor', told him (showing that public taste has changed little in a century):

'Parliament, to tell you the truth, isn't much in my line; but I've often wondered why you never show the House of Commons after the dynamite explosion. And then there's that member who shot himself on Hampstead Heath – that would make a splendid slide. I could fire a pistol from the back, and you could writhe in supposed agony on the platform. That would draw the other class; and if you want any more horrors – not humours – why "I've got 'em on my list!."

* * *

'My drawings, after being designed, had all to be carefully drawn out, and subjected to elaborate processes, before it was possible for them to be reproduced on glass, for the powerful limelight instrument, by means of which they were presented to the notice of the public; and little do the audience realise that a picture which passes before their eyes in some thirty seconds (and owing to the number to be shown some will not even be before them as long as that) had, perhaps, taken many weeks to produce in the form in which they will behold it.

* * *

'I have a great advantage over most other platform performers, inasmuch as I am in the dark most of my entertainment, the gas in the hall being lowered, as far as it will go without being extinguished altogether; so I need not look at my audience, but can keep my eyes shut and hammer away. The people, of course, have their eyes fixed on my quickly changing pictures, and the strong light on the screen, in the centre of the platform, makes the darkness, at either side, seem more intense. But, on the other hand, it lights up my audience for my own benefit. If my audience is an interesting one, I like to watch it closely, but if it is not, I simply shut my eyes, and thus save both their feelings and my own.

* * *

'The lantern is always considered fair game for a sneer. There is nothing so embarrassing as to have an incompetent lanternist. Fancy an experience like the following: a splendid audience, in a capitally managed institution near Liverpool; the Honorary Secretary being himself no mean rival of George Grossmith. The lanternist, with his lantern, provided by the supposed leading opticians of Liverpool, turned up a few minutes before I was due on the platform. My introduction over, I gave the signal for the first picture to be shown. To my horror, the wretched man had not focussed the lantern, and about a third of the picture appeared on the screen, while the rest of it distributed itself over the surrounding walls and ceiling. Of course I left the platform, and the brilliant operator had to ask the people in the crammed hall to make way in the centre, while he altered the position of the lantern.

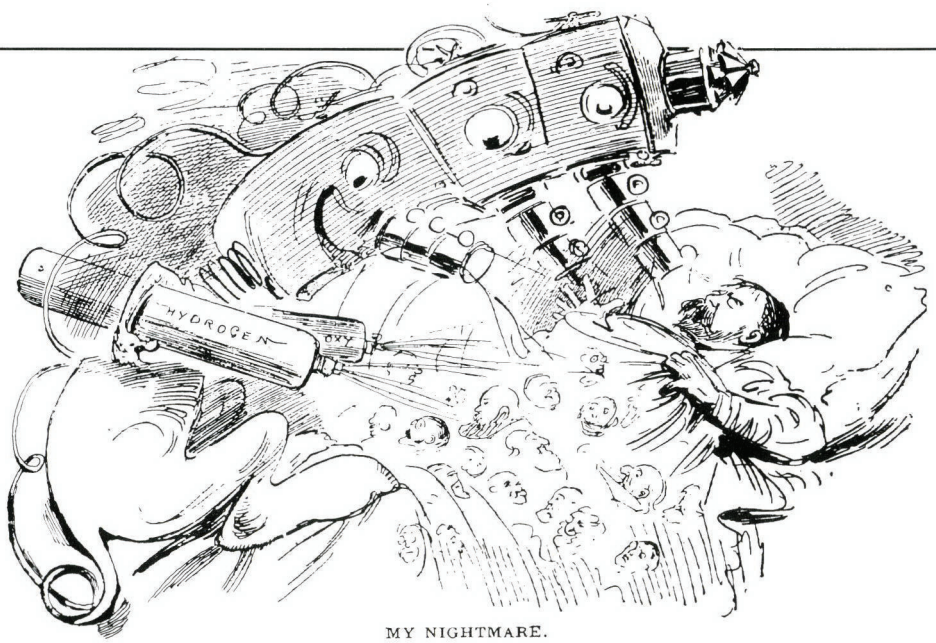
The picture I was showing was the daughter of Dibutades tracing her lover's portrait on the wall. When I returned to the platform, I found, to my utter disgust, that the lanternist, instead of coming nearer to make the picture smaller had struggled backwards, and only the foot of the young lady was visible, looking like the advertisement of a chiropodist, or du Maurier's Trilby, the rest of the picture, I believe, being cast upon the steeple of the church on the other side of the street. I pitied the audience, and they pitied me. The Honorary Secretary was distracted beyond measure, and seemed to me to have carried the table and lantern and lanternist himself, bodily over the heads of the people. Most of the people had been waiting an hour or so before I arrived, and as this was hardly the entertainment they expected to see, I filled up the time by reciting to them a story by an American humourist – the only time in my life I had ever attempted to do such a thing. I then proceeded with my lecture on 'Portraiture', and referring to the ancient Egyptian mummy portraits, I gave the signal for a mummy portrait to appear, when, to my astonishment, on came a picture I intended to show later: Lord Randolph Churchill, not as a mummy, but as the volatile and verbose Sir William Harcourt. The audience roared, but much as they would admire a blended portrait of the politician, neither Historicus nor Lord Randolph can claim to be ancient Egyptian.

The operator removed it from the screen – in again it went, this time sideways! Another protest – it vanished, only to appear next moment upside down! 'Number Two!' I yelled, 'You've got Number Twenty-two!' In went Number Twenty-three – upside down, and so on the whole evening. My feelings can be better imagined than described!

'This is not the only trouble of the kind I have met with; the gas has often suddenly failed, and on one occasion the operator, having to catch his train, disappeared in the middle of the entertainment! After such experiences I determined I would depend upon no one but myself, and that I would devise my own arrangements for showing my own pictures, engaging my own operators exclusively for the purpose.

'The search for a lantern was long and tedious, and no sooner was it announced that I was about to use such an instrument in my entertainment than I was inundated with letters from all parts of the country, not only from the trade, but from amateurs in possession of magic lanterns, who invited me to rush down to Gloucestershire or Cornwall, as the case might be, to view vulnerable instruments inherited from ancestors who must have lived in the time of Guy Fawkes, with a view to purchase. At last I had to procure an entirely new triple lantern, of the most modern type, which I used, whenever I gave my entertainment, throughout the country, and this sketch of my dream on the night upon which this elaborate instrument, with all its new and complicated apparatus for holding the gases, was delivered at my residence, may serve to indicate, what I have gone through on this score, better than any words which I can use.

'After several seasons, however, I found that the lanternists in the provinces had improved and become trustworthy and excellent operators. I have, therefore, now for some time, given up taking my own lantern, and have not recently had a hitch of any kind.



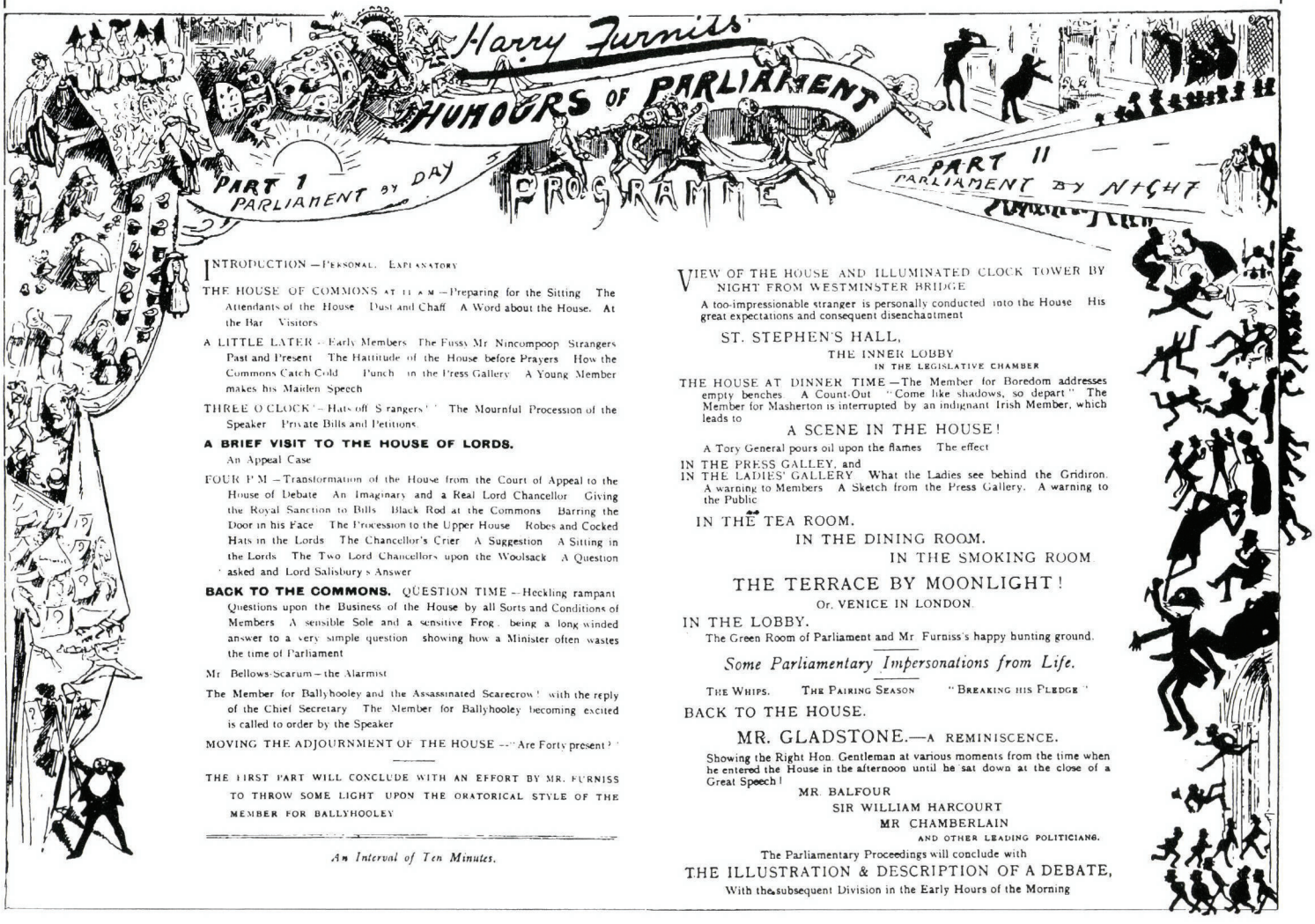
MY NIGHTMARE.

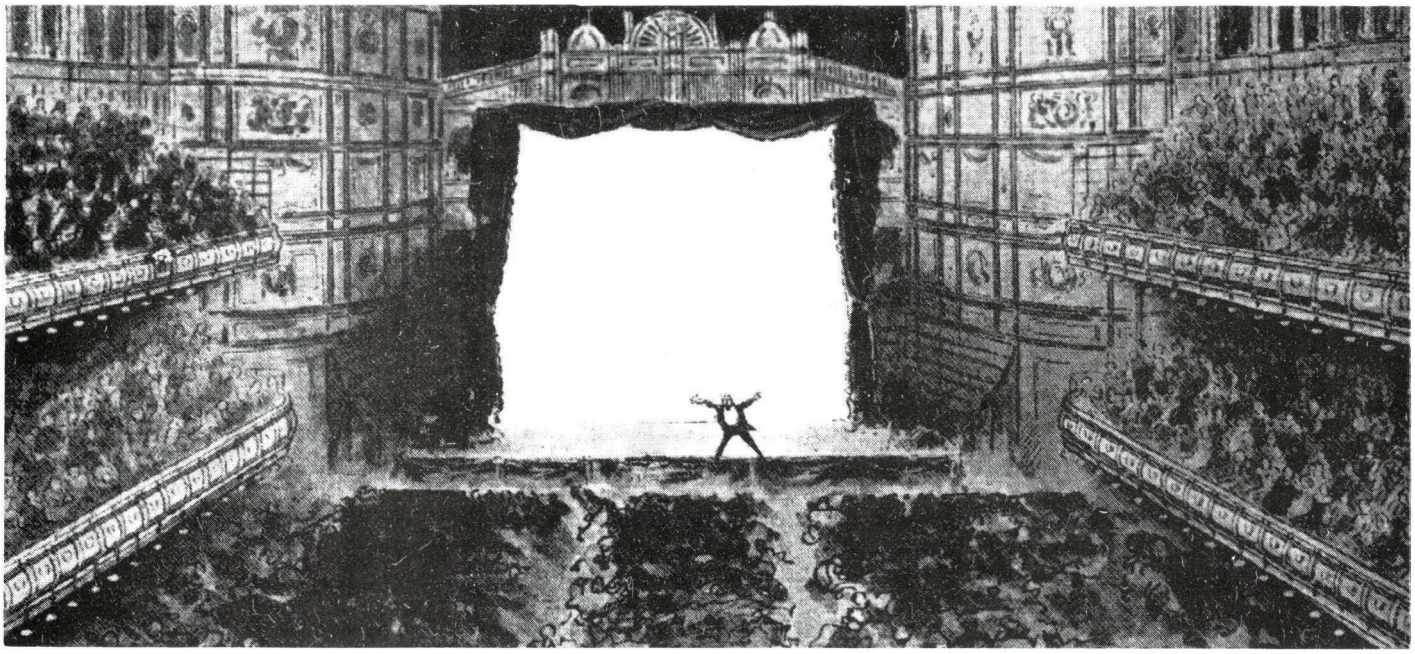
'"No reasonable offer refused." The following is not an advertisement. I came across it in "Items of Interest" in a popular journal, and given as news – at least I did not solicit it, nor did I pay for it: "The oxyhydrogen lantern, with which Mr Harry Furniss illustrates his 'Humours of Parliament', is one of the finest, if not absolutely the best of its kind in the world. It cost nearly 150 guineas. In most illustrated lectures and entertainments, the number of slides used varies from fifty to sixty, seventy being an exceptionally large number. Mr Furniss has one hundred and sixty. He also has a duplicate set, in case of any accidents happening to the one he is using. All the magnificent views of the Interior of the Houses of Parliament are from his own pen-and-ink sketches. Owing to the deaths of Mr Parnell and Mr W. H. Smith, Mr Furniss had to reconstruct a considerable portion of his entertainment whilst on tour."

* * *

'There are sure to be occasional mishaps when the lecturer is assisted by the lantern; but as in my case, when one is not taken too seriously, it is easy to turn the misfortune into a joke.

'A fly was the offender on one occasion in my experience. I was showing some portraits of Mr Gladstone in my entertainment "The Humours of Parliament", and was doing my level best to rouse an appreciative North Country audience to a high





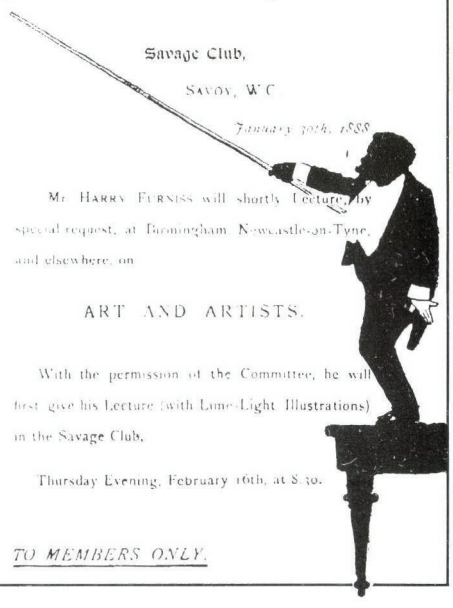
pitch of enthusiasm for the man they worshipped so. I was telling them that at one moment he looks like this, and at another moment he looks like that, when I was amazed to hear them go into fits of laughter! In describing Mr Gladstone I dilate upon him first in a rhetorical vein, and then proceed to caricature my own delineations, and it has always been flattering to me to find that the serious portraits have been received with a grave attention only equalled by the laughter with which the caricatures have been greeted. But not so on this occasion. I spoke of his flashing eye (titters!), his noble brow (laughter!), and a mention of his commanding aquiline nose nearly sent them into hysterics! Now in my lecturing days mishaps may have occurred which were due to some fault of the lantern or operator provided by the society I lectured to; but with the splendid set of lanterns I had made for my entertainment, engineered by the infallible Professor who exhibited for me, I never troubled to look round to see if the picture was all right. But for a second it struck me that by some mischance he might be showing the caricatures in place of the serious portraits. Quickly I turned round, and the sight that met my eyes made me at once join in the general roar. There was a gigantic fly promenading on the nasal organ of the Grand Old Man, unheeding the attempts which were being made on his life by the Professor, armed with a long pointed weapon. It had walked into the Professor's parlour – that is to say, into his lantern – and taken up its temporary residence between the lenses, whence it was magnified a hundredfold on to the screen!

If anything of this kind happens to a Professor lecturing on some scientific subject, it is no laughing matter, especially to a gentleman lecturing at a meeting of the British Association. At one of these gatherings a well-known Professor was giving a most interesting and appreciated address, illustrated by the limelight, on the subject of "Quartz Fibres". If I remember rightly, he was explaining to the audience that the strands of a spider's web were purposely rough so that the spider could climb them easily, but that a quartz fibre was smooth and glossy, and a spider would never attempt to ascend one. He showed on the sheet a single thread of a spider's web and a single quartz fibre, and amid the breathless excitement of the audience a real live spider was put into the lantern. The applause with which it was greeted must have made the poor thing nervous, I suppose, or else it may have had an attack of stage fright; anyhow it curled itself up in a corner and refused to budge. A sharpened pencil, which magnified on the screen looked like a battering ram, was brought into play, and the unfortunate creature had to rouse itself. "Now, ladies and gentlemen, you will notice that it is quite impossible for the spider to ascend the quartz fibre – it may try, but it is bound to fail – but see how it will rush to the strand from its familiar web!" The spider received an extra dig with the pencil, and then with astonishing alacrity ran to the quartz fibre, up which it climbed with the greatest ease amid the roars of the delighted audience. The fact was that the Professor had omitted to explain that his argument only applied to female spiders. These have a pernicious habit of running after their spouses and belabouring them, so the poor hubby is provided by Nature with a hirsute growth on his legs which enables him to escape by climbing, and nothing would delight him more than for his wife to give chase to him if there was a quartz fibre anywhere near.

* * *

'Sometimes there is no gallery in which to place the lantern and then the pictures have to be shown from the floor of the hall, when it seems to be the delight of everyone coming in late to walk up the centre in the full light of the powerful rays of the lantern, presumably for the pleasure of beholding their image projected in silhouette on to the screen. Those awful feminine hats ought to be abolished, and all late comers ought to be made to find their seats on their hands and knees, as they run the risk of upsetting the thread of the lecturer's discourse, and the gravity of the audience as well I remember once when I was giving my lecture on "Portraiture: Past and Present", and illustrating the portraits on models, I came to some near the bottom of the screen. "Here", said I, "we have the Lord Mayor and the Lady Mayoress of London, 1300 A.D." At that moment the Mayor and Mayoress of the town, who, for effect I suppose, had come in a quarter of an hour late to the seats reserved for them in the centre of the hall, walked past the rays of the lantern, and were of course projected on to the screen, unconsciously burlesquing my picture, and causing an effect they had not anticipated.

* * *

'I referred just now to the mishaps that will occur with the best regulated lanterns. The gas, for instance, may become prematurely exhausted, which necessitates a stoppage while the cylinders are being changed, and when Rudyard Kipling's work "The Light that Failed" was published, I immediately sent for a copy, thinking that probably the author had tried entertaining with the aid of the limelight in India and had had some experience of this kind. I could give that clever author plenty of material for another volume on "The Light that Failed" – a collection of anecdotes connected with the magic lantern. But, as I said, it doesn't so much matter to the entertainer as the lecturer, and when I was a lecturer I felt any mishap of the kind very keenly; but an entertainer is a privileged being, and can turn the matter off with a joke at the expense of his manager, his gas-man, his audience, or his subject. No less a personage than Sir William Harcourt happened to be on the screen when my gas went out one evening in Scotland. I had to retire from the platform while new cylinders of gas were being adjusted, and when I made my reappearance I assured my audience that it was probably the first occasion on which Sir William had been put out for want of gas!

'I recollect, though, once at Bradford, where I was lecturing, the audience were put out for want of it, for the operators supplied by the association I was lecturing to were utterly incompetent. The gas was bad, to begin with – it became small by degrees and beautifully less, and suddenly went out altogether! So did the operators. They simply bolted out of the hall, and left the lantern to manage itself.'