

MOTION.PICTURE

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My FIRST VISIT TO THE MOVIES

Homer Dunne.

I RECALL, in the dim past of the closing years of the nineteenth century, pausing one summer evening before a store-window on Chestnut Street, Philadelphia. In the window, from which shone forth a light of blinding intensity, was an odd-looking box-like contrivance upon a tripod. Projecting from the side of the box was a handle resembling somewhat, in size and shape, the crank of a clothes-wringer. A perspiring young man in shirt-sleeves was industriously turning the handle. An all too hastily painted placard, from the crude letters of which the ink had dripped in fantastic festoons, bore an inscription something to this effect:

MARVELOUS MOVING PHOTOGRAPHS!

THE WONDER OF THE AGE!

ADMISSION - - - - - 5 CENTS

In the doorway of the store stood a fat and strident-voiced barker, who harangued the knot of curious passers-by clustered before the window like moths around a candle. Occasionally some one, more venturesome than the others, would hand the barker a nickel and enter the store. Presently he would come out, blinking his eyes and looking rather sheepish. The whole atmosphere of the place reeked with penny claptrap.

Curiosity finally induced me to investigate what might be meant by

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“moving photographs.” I dropped five cents into the grimy, greasy hand of the barker and went inside.

At the far end of the store a small sheet, obviously dirty, was hung loosely from a wire. A rope was stretched from one wall to the other, about three feet in front of the sheet. There were no seats; the half-dozen or so spectators standing about here and there smoked vigorously and mopped their fevered foreheads. The store was innocent of lights, tho the rays from two huge arc-lamps in the window made the place almost as glaring as noonday.

Apparently I had arrived during an intermission. The biliously yellow sheet, down the center of which ran a seam like a broad furrow, loomed ghostily before me, an aching void of nothing, billowing in and out occasionally like an uneasy specter.

Presently there sounded a noisy sputtering and spitting in the window. Upon the sheet appeared a silhouette of the head of the perspiring young man who officiated at the clothes-wringer handle. The shadow moved grotesquely here and there, as tho he were dodging a swarm of angry hornets. If this were a “moving photograph,” I decided I preferred the shadowgraphs of donkeys and rabbits I had learnt to throw upon the wall in the days of my callow youth.

I was on the point of leaving, looking, I have no doubt, as sheepish as those who had preceded me, when the voice of the barker took on a new thrill of urgency and rose to a higher pitch of shrillness, if that were possible.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” he fairly shrieked. “The show is about to begin. See the marvelous, mysterious moving photographs. The wonder of the age! The chance of a lifetime! Admission only five cents, half a dime, the twentieth part of a dollar!”

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A half-dozen more of the curious filed into the store in response to this appeal, and I waited to see what would happen.

The sputtering and spitting became louder and sharper. The silhouette of the young man's head disappeared, and the sheet suddenly glowed with an exaggerated phosphorescence. A noise like the grinding of a coffee-mill became audible. Clickety-clack! Click! Sputter! Spit and click! Then the sheet broke out into a rash of magnified measles.

Great blobs of pearl-colored light, pocked with points of shadow, danced and slid and rollicked up and down, from one side to the other, and here and there. They circumnavigated the sheet, bisected it, flew off at impossible tangents, and behaved altogether in a highly drunk and disorderly manner. These were interspersed with flashes of zigzag lightning and punctuated with soft and mellow glows like a summer sunset. As an exhibition of a "light fantasy," it was an unqualified success. But as yet nothing even remotely resembling a picture, moving or still, had appeared.

After a few minutes of this luminous orgy, however, a man's face popped out from between two particularly brilliant splotches of light. It was gone in an instant, as tho' the fellow to whom it belonged had all but succeeded in climbing a fence, only to lose his footing. Soon another face appeared in the northwest corner of the sheet. Whether it was the same man I have never been able to determine to my complete satisfaction. The second face remained with us longer. But that, too, hastily disappeared. Later, a human torso flashed into view; then its arms popped into place, then its legs: its head arrived soon after, and it stood revealed in all its entirety, a perfect man.

Eventually he was joined by his pal, and for nearly a minute they gestured

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and gesticulated at each other. The argument grew warmer and warmer, and Number One finally lost his temper. Without warning he launched a vicious blow at Number Two.

Whether the blow was a knockout I shall never know. Before it landed, the sheet was plunged into pitchy darkness—and the show was over.

I have often wondered what would have happened to me—assuming I had had the wit to make the forecast—if I had predicted to those who witnessed with me that weird performance, that the day would come when that same moving photograph would be developed and perfected to show, intelligibly and artistically, such stupendous spectacles as "Quo Vadis?" such fairy stories as "Cinderella," and such plays as "Du Barry," "The Christian," "The Girl of the Golden West" and "The Island of Regeneration," to say nothing of the many, many other equally charming stories that are now told daily in Moving Pictures.

I can only believe that I would have been laughed at as a false prophet or locked up as a dangerous lunatic. For no one took that exhibition seriously. How could we, when not one of us knew what it was all about?