Chapter 29

The Pandorama

Although the party was not supposed to begin till six o'clock, Bert turned up at half past four, bringing the 'Pandoramer' with him.

At about half past five the other guests began to arrive. Elsie and Charley Linden came first, the girl in a pretty blue frock trimmed with white lace, and Charley resplendent in a new suit, which, like his sister's dress, had been made out of somebody's cast-off clothes that had been given to their mother by a visiting lady. It had taken Mrs Linden many hours of hard work to contrive these garments; in fact, more time than the things were worth, for although they looked all right--especially Elsie's--the stuff was so old that it would not wear very long: but this was the only way in which she could get clothes for the children at all: she certainly could not afford to buy them any. So she spent hours and hours making things that she knew would fall to pieces almost as soon as they were made.

After these came Nellie, Rosie and Tommy Newman. These presented a much less prosperous appearance than the other two. Their mother was not so skilful at contriving new clothes out of old. Nellie was wearing a grown-up woman's blouse, and by way of ulster she had on an old-fashioned jacket of thick cloth with large pearl buttons. This was also a grown-up woman's garment: it was shaped to fit the figure of a

tall woman with wide shoulders and a small waist; consequently, it did not fit Nellie to perfection. The waist reached below the poor child's hips.

Tommy was arrayed in the patched remains of what had once been a good suit of clothes. They had been purchased at a second-hand shop last summer and had been his 'best' for several months, but they were now much too small for him.

Little Rosie--who was only just over three years old--was better off than either of the other two, for she had a red cloth dress that fitted her perfectly: indeed, as the district visitor who gave it to her mother had remarked, it looked as if it had been made for her.

'It's not much to look at,' observed Nellie, referring to her big jacket, but all the same we was very glad of it when the rain came on.'

The coat was so big that by withdrawing her arms from the sleeves and using it as a cloak or shawl she had managed to make it do for all three of them.

Tommy's boots were so broken that the wet had got in and saturated his stockings, so Nora made him take them all off and wear some old ones of Frankie's whilst his own were drying at the fire.

Philpot, with two large paper bags full of oranges and nuts, arrived just as they were sitting down to tea--or rather cocoa--for with the

exception of Bert all the children expressed a preference for the latter beverage. Bert would have liked to have cocoa also, but hearing that the grown-ups were going to have tea, he thought it would be more manly to do the same. This question of having tea or cocoa for tea became a cause of much uproarious merriment on the part of the children, who asked each other repeatedly which they liked best, 'tea tea?' or 'cocoa tea?' They thought it so funny that they said it over and over again, screaming with laughter all the while, until Tommy got a piece of cake stuck in his throat and became nearly black in the face, and then Philpot had to turn him upside down and punch him in the back to save him from choking to death. This rather sobered the others, but for some time afterwards whenever they looked at each other they began to laugh afresh because they thought it was such a good joke.

When they had filled themselves up with the 'cocoa-tea' and cakes and bread and jam, Elsie Linden and Nellie Newman helped to clear away the cups and saucers, and then Owen lit the candles on the Christmas tree and distributed the toys to the children, and a little while afterwards Philpot--who had got a funny-looking mask out of one of the bon-bons--started a fine game pretending to be a dreadful wild animal which he called a Pandroculus, and crawling about on all fours, rolled his goggle eyes and growled out he must have a little boy or girl to eat for his supper.

He looked so terrible that although they knew it was only a joke they were almost afraid of him, and ran away laughing and screaming to shelter themselves behind Nora or Owen; but all the same, whenever

Philpot left off playing, they entreated him to 'be it again', and so he had to keep on being a Pandroculus, until exhaustion compelled him to return to his natural form.

After this they all sat round the table and had a game of cards; 'Snap', they called it, but nobody paid much attention to the rules of the game: everyone seemed to think that the principal thing to do was to kick up as much row as possible. After a while Philpot suggested a change to 'Beggar my neighbour', and won quite a lot of cards before they found out that he had hidden all the jacks in the pocket of his coat, and then they mobbed him for a cheat. He might have been seriously injured if it had not been for Bert, who created a diversion by standing on a chair and announcing that he was about to introduce to their notice 'Bert White's World-famed Pandorama' as exhibited before all the nobility and crowned heads of Europe, England, Ireland and Scotland, including North America and Wales.

Loud cheers greeted the conclusion of Bert's speech. The box was placed on the table, which was then moved to the end of the room, and the chairs were ranged in two rows in front.

The 'Pandorama' consisted of a stage-front made of painted cardboard and fixed on the front of a wooden box about three feet long by two feet six inches high, and about one foot deep from back to front. The 'Show' was a lot of pictures cut out of illustrated weekly papers and pasted together, end to end, so as to form a long strip or ribbon. Bert had coloured all the pictures with water-colours.

Just behind the wings of the stage-front at each end of the box--was an upright roller, and the long strip of pictures was rolled up on this. The upper ends of the rollers came through the top of the box and had handles attached to them. When these handles were turned the pictures passed across the stage, unrolling from one roller and rolling on to the other, and were illuminated by the light of three candles placed behind.

The idea of constructing this machine had been suggested to Bert by a panorama entertainment he had been to see some time before.

'The Style of the decorations,' he remarked, alluding to the painted stage-front, 'is Moorish.'

He lit the candles at the back of the stage and, having borrowed a tea-tray from Nora, desired the audience to take their seats. When they had all done so, he requested Owen to put out the lamp and the candles on the tree, and then he made another speech, imitating the manner of the lecturer at the panorama entertainment before mentioned.

'Ladies and Gentlemen: with your kind permission I am about to hinterduce to your notice some pitchers of events in different parts of the world. As each pitcher appears on the stage I will give a short explanation of the subject, and afterwards the band will play a suitable collection of appropriated music, consisting of hymns and all the latest and most popular songs of the day, and the audience is

kindly requested to join in the chorus.

'Our first scene,' continued Bert as he turned the handles and brought the picture into view, 'represents the docks at Southampton; the magnificent steamer which you see lying alongside the shore is the ship which is waiting to take us to foreign parts. As we have already paid our fare, we will now go on board and set sail.'

As an accompaniment to this picture Bert played the tune of 'Goodbye, Dolly, I must leave you', and by the time the audience had finished singing the chorus he had rolled on another scene, which depicted a dreadful storm at sea, with a large ship evidently on the point of foundering. The waves were running mountains high and the inky clouds were riven by forked lightning. To increase the terrifying effect, Bert rattled the tea tray and played 'The Bay of Biscay', and the children sung the chorus whilst he rolled the next picture into view. This scene showed the streets of a large city; mounted police with drawn swords were dispersing a crowd: several men had been ridden down and were being trampled under the hoofs of the horses, and a number of others were bleeding profusely from wounds on the head and face.

'After a rather stormy passage we arrives safely at the beautiful city of Berlin, in Germany, just in time to see a procession of unemployed workmen being charged by the military police. This picture is hintitled "Tariff Reform means Work for All".'

As an appropriate musical selection Bert played the tune of a

well-known song, and the children sang the words:

'To be there! to be there!
Oh, I knew what it was to be there!
And when they tore me clothes,
Blacked me eyes and broke me nose,
Then I knew what it was to be there!'

During the singing Bert turned the handles backwards and again brought on the picture of the storm at sea.

'As we don't want to get knocked on the 'ed, we clears out of Berlin as soon as we can--whiles we're safe--and once more embarks on our gallint ship' and after a few more turns of the 'andle we finds ourselves back once more in Merry Hingland, where we see the inside of a blacksmith's shop with a lot of half-starved women making iron chains. They work seventy hours a week for seven shillings. Our next scene is hintitled "The Hook and Eye Carders". 'Ere we see the inside of a room in Slumtown, with a mother and three children and the old grandmother sewin' hooks and eyes on cards to be sold in drapers' shops. It ses underneath the pitcher that 384 hooks and 384 eyes has to be joined together and sewed on cards for one penny.'

While this picture was being rolled away the band played and the children sang with great enthusiasm:

'Rule, Brittania, Brittania rules the waves!

Britons, never, never, never shall be slaves!'

'Our next picture is called "An Englishman's Home". 'Ere we see the inside of another room in Slumtown, with the father and mother and four children sitting down to dinner--bread and drippin' and tea. It ses underneath the pitcher that there's Thirteen millions of people in England always on the verge of starvation. These people that you see in the pitcher might be able to get a better dinner than this if it wasn't that most of the money wot the bloke earns 'as to pay the rent. Again we turns the 'andle and presently we comes to another very beautiful scene--"Early Morning in Trafalgar Square". 'Ere we see a lot of Englishmen who have been sleepin' out all night because they ain't got no 'omes to go to.'

As a suitable selection for this picture, Bert played the tune of a music-hall song, the words of which were familiar to all the youngsters, who sang at the top of their voices:

'I live in Trafalgar Square,
With four lions to guard me,
Pictures and statues all over the place,
Lord Nelson staring me straight in the face,
Of course it's rather draughty,
But still I'm sure you'll agree,
If it's good enough for Lord Nelson,
It's quite good enough for me.'

'Next we 'ave a view of the dining-hall at the Topside Hotel in London, where we see the tables set for a millionaires' banquet. The forks and spoons is made of solid gold and the plates is made of silver. The flowers that you see on the tables and 'angin' down from the ceilin' and on the walls is worth £2,000 and it cost the bloke wot give the supper over £30,000 for this one beano. A few more turns of the 'andle shows us another glorious banquet--the King of Rhineland being entertained by the people of England. Next we finds ourselves looking on at the Lord Mayor's supper at the Mansion House. All the fat men that you see sittin' at the tables is Liberal and Tory Members of Parlimint. After this we 'ave a very beautiful pitcher hintitled "Four footed Haristocrats". 'Ere you see Lady Slumrent's pet dogs sittin' up on chairs at their dinner table with white linen napkins tied round their necks, eatin' orf silver plates like human people and being waited on by real live waiters in hevening dress. Lady Slumrent is very fond of her pretty pets and she does not allow them to be fed on anything but the very best food; they gets chicken, rump steak, mutton chops, rice pudding, jelly and custard.'

'I wished I was a pet dog, don't you?' remarked Tommy Newman to Charley Linden.

'Not arf!' replied Charley.

'Here we see another unemployed procession,' continued Bert as he rolled another picture into sight; '2,000 able-bodied men who are not allowed to work. Next we see the hinterior of a Hindustrial

'Ome--Blind children and cripples working for their living. Our next scene is called "Cheap Labour". 'Ere we see a lot of small boys about twelve and thirteen years old bein' served out with their Labour Stifficats, which gives 'em the right to go to work and earn money to help their unemployed fathers to pay the slum rent.

'Once more we turns the 'andle and brings on one of our finest scenes. This lovely pitcher is hintitled "The Hangel of Charity", and shows us the beautiful Lady Slumrent seated at the table in a cosy corner of 'er charmin' boodore, writin' out a little cheque for the relief of the poor of Slumtown.

'Our next scene is called "The Rival Candidates, or, a Scene during the General Election". On the left you will observe, standin' up in a motor car, a swell bloke with a eyeglass stuck in one eye, and a overcoat with a big fur collar and cuffs, addressing the crowd: this is the Honourable Augustus Slumrent, the Conservative candidate. On the other side of the road we see another motor car and another swell bloke with a round pane of glass in one eye and a overcoat with a big fur collar and cuffs, standing up in the car and addressin' the crowd. This is Mr Mandriver, the Liberal candidate. The crowds of shabby-lookin' chaps standin' round the motor cars wavin' their 'ats and cheerin' is workin' men. Both the candidates is tellin' 'em the same old story, and each of 'em is askin' the workin' men to elect 'im to Parlimint, and promisin' to do something or other to make things better for the lower horders.'

As an appropriate selection to go with this picture, Bert played the tune of a popular song, the words being well known to the children, who sang enthusiastically, clapping their hands and stamping their feet on the floor in time with the music:

'We've both been there before,
Many a time, many a time!
We've both been there before,
Many a time!
Where many a gallon of beer has gone.
To colour his nose and mine,
We've both been there before,
Many a time, many a time!'

At the conclusion of the singing, Bert turned another picture into view.

''Ere we 'ave another election scene. At each side we see the two candidates the same as in the last pitcher. In the middle of the road we see a man lying on the ground, covered with blood, with a lot of Liberal and Tory working men kickin' 'im, jumpin' on 'im, and stampin' on 'is face with their 'obnailed boots. The bloke on the ground is a Socialist, and the reason why they're kickin' 'is face in is because 'e said that the only difference between Slumrent and Mandriver was that they was both alike.'

While the audience were admiring this picture, Bert played another well-known tune, and the children sang the words:

'Two lovely black eyes,

Oh what a surprise!

Only for telling a man he was wrong,

Two lovely black eyes.'

Bert continued to turn the handles of the rollers and a long succession of pictures passed across the stage, to the delight of the children, who cheered and sang as occasion demanded, but the most enthusiastic outburst of all greeted the appearance of the final picture, which was a portrait of the King. Directly the children saw it--without waiting for the band--they gave three cheers and began to sing the chorus of the National Anthem.

A round of applause for Bert concluded the Pandorama performance; the lamp and the candles of the Christmas tree were relit--for although all the toys had been taken off, the tree still made a fine show with the shining glass ornaments--and then they had some more games; blind man's buff, a tug-of-war--in which Philpot was defeated with great laughter--and a lot of other games. And when they were tired of these, each child 'said a piece' or sung a song, learnt specially for the occasion. The only one who had not come prepared in this respect was little Rosie, and even she--so as to be the same as the others--insisted on reciting the only piece she knew. Kneeling on the hearthrug, she put her hands together, palm to palm, and shutting her eyes very tightly she repeated the verse she always said every night before going to bed:

'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
Look on me, a little child.
Pity my simplicity,
Suffer me to come to Thee.'

Then she stood up and kissed everyone in turn, and Philpot crossed over and began looking out of the window, and coughed, and blew his nose, because a nut that he had been eating had gone down the wrong way.

Most of them were by this time quite tired out, so after some supper the party broke up. Although they were nearly all very sleepy, none of them were very willing to go, but they were consoled by the thought of another entertainment to which they were going later on in the week--the Band of Hope Tea and Prize Distribution at the Shining Light Chapel.

Bert undertook to see Elsie and Charley safely home, and Philpot volunteered to accompany Nellie and Tommy Newman, and to carry Rosie, who was so tired that she fell asleep on his shoulder before they left the house.

As they were going down the stairs Frankie held a hurried consultation with his mother, with the result that he was able to shout after them an invitation to come again next Christmas.