



A WONDERFUL CHRISTMAS PARTY.

By J. TOM BURGESS.



ALLOW me to introduce Monsieur Decremps.

Monsieur was welcome, nay, more than welcome, to our small party. His reputation had preceded him, and we were all anxious to make his acquaintance. Few people had heard of Monsieur Decremps even then, and now his fame is eclipsed by his successors Signor Bosco, Robert Houdin, Frikell, and our own Professor Anderson. It was Monsieur Decremps who taught Sir Walter Scott the secret of the divining-rod. It was he who taught all recent magicians their most profound and recondite illusions, with which they have delighted and astonished modern audiences ; yet without detracting from their well-earned reputation, I think they only faintly imitate their old master. Yet Monsieur Decremps gave instructions in sleight of hand at one half-crown per lesson, and it is but fair to say that the charge was the same whether one or twenty attended his *soirées*—though I believe *séances* is now the correct term.

Monsieur Decremps was an old man ; he was born prior to 1785, and therefore prior to the first French Revolution. He had been sadly neglected by both Fame and Fortune. In appearance he was not inviting. If he had ever been young, for we had doubts even on that point, it was obvious that time had been more than envious of his charms, and had made amends for the neglect of the fickle goddess ; for Monsieur Decremps, though particularly clever, was also particularly ill-looking. In his early youth he had made himself notorious by his exposure of the

tricks of Monsieur Pinetti, the favourite Parisian magician of the Court of Louis the Sixteenth, and had in his old age become an *émigré*.

Such was the very clever French conjuror to whom I was introduced at a Christmas *soirée* in the ante-spirittrapping and knot-tying days. Many of the illusions and tricks which the old gentleman showed us on that memorable evening will afford some ingenious young gentleman a few hints which will go far to make up a "marvellous Christmas party."

The room in which we first met M. Decremps was a small one. Some old tapestry hung on the sides of the room, and across one end where a pair of folding-doors led to an adjoining apartment. I had only time to note these facts when our philosophic entertainer made his appearance.

"I am no conjuror, and I am a *mécanicien*," said the old man; "but I will unveil many curious illusions, and will answer any questions that you may ask."

He first took a small silver whistle which seemed to be endued with as many marvellous powers as that of the "pied piper of Hamelin." There was a sound of rushing waters, or rather the rippling of a fountain. The lights in the room became obscured, and we were conscious of the tapestry moving before our eyes, though we could hardly discern the movement. The light was tinted with the most intense purple, and as it changed through every hue of the rainbow, gradually becoming lighter and lighter, we saw before us a scene in an enchanted land, while the odour of a thousand flowers was diffused throughout the apartment. A gentle strain of music burst forth; we saw birds fluttering and singing; serpents crawling; flowers growing before us and blooming with beauty; ducks were feeding by the side of the miniature lake, on which swans were floating along. On the side walls we could now see two semi-transparent portraits, the frames of which seemed to burn with light as it flashed forth from them. I confess I drew my breath at long intervals as I gazed on these wonders so marvellously produced. Just at this moment we heard a sweet voice singing some melodious French chanson, and when its strains died away M. Decremps spoke.

"You see before you," he said in his delightful broken French, "a combination of the scientific principles which dazzle the eye and delude the senses. You think it is fairy land: so it is—the fairy land of Philosophy. Let us take the portraits first. The medallions are here circular and semi-transparent. The first is by design; the latter an accident of which we have taken advantage. The frame is composed of twisted tubes of glass, which revolve on their axis with what is known

as 'the sun and planet motion'; the rim of the medallion forming the centre wheel which turns the rest round, and makes that change in their luminous appearance which has attracted your attention. If the glass tubes are fitted with pinions, which fit in a toothed wheel the size of the picture or the medallion, the process is easy."

In these days singing nightingales and piping bullfinches were unknown, and M. Decremps made no pretence to imitate the real bird. The first two were unmistakably artificial. A small, precious stone formed their eyes, and their bodies were covered with minute shells, which had the iridescence of mother-of-pearl, as their wings moved and their beaks worked as they sang charmingly, one accompanying the other to the minutest note.

My neighbour whispered, "Ingenious; but fastened to the perch, you see. The note is well done, very well done!"

He had hardly finished speaking when the birds flew from one perch to the other in a most natural, fluttering manner.

"Bravo!" my friend exclaimed, and there were murmurs of approval and whispers of "How is it done?" One suggested a hidden spring in the body of the birds, but that was preposterous.

M. Decremps smiled, and said that in this instance a little illusion was practised. It was not intended that they should appear as live birds, but to show that ostensible imitation birds could have free movements apparently detached from any fixed object; that was attained partly by threads and partly by the mechanical illusion of which he had spoken. The two perches were joined together at their extremities at an angle of forty-five degrees. The birds, though apparently resting on one of these perches, were not, in reality, attached to either. There was a third perch, so formed that it appeared to be a portion of one of the others; and on this the birds were fixed, and through it the threads were taken which moved the wings and beaks. By a rapid movement, so rapid as to be unperceived by the spectators, it carried the birds from one perch to the other, care being taken to divert the attention of the lookers-on to some other object at the exact moment.

The wonderful speaking head of Stodare, which depended for its success on the body of the confederate being hidden behind reflecting mirrors, appeared, to our eyes, surpassed by a floating cherub which hung two or three feet beneath the ceiling. The wires which held it were so thin as to be nearly invisible, in order that any idea of collusion or pipe connection with the ceiling might not be suggested. The answers which the figure returned to our questions through a gilt

speaking-trumpet in its hand were so marvellously distinct as to be startling to weak nerves.

M. Decremps said he merely kept the figure to show how inexplicable many of the most simple contrivances were. If the voice was feeble, it would be said to be done by ventriloquism, but as it came loud and unmistakably from the figure, the whole appeared marvellous. Yet the speaking-trumpet answered for a hearing-trumpet as well. There was a similar trumpet hidden in the head of the figure; and a simple pipe, hidden in the ceiling above, enabled an assistant to hear and send the answers in that loud and strange tone which had so startled us, without giving rise to any suspicion as to whence the voice came.

Our attention was next directed to the beautiful fountain, which formed the centre-piece of these wonders. On one side there rose a tree, full of leaves, and by the side were arranged several vases, some of which had growing plants in them. Others were apparently empty. There were about four in all. Ducks swam about the edges of the fountain pool, whilst the swans sailed stately round the basin. Our attention was first directed to the tree, which seemed to expand, and then blossom. In a few minutes it was loaded with fruit. It was scarcely full when the gleaming eyes of a serpent appeared beneath the tree, and we saw the glistening creature crawl up the stem in a spiral direction, and disappear amidst the leaves. Another and another succeeded, until it became a matter of wonder where they were all hidden.

M. Decremps explained that, in reality, there were only two serpents, and whilst one was ascending the other was descending inside the stem of the tree. The blossoming of the tree, he said, was really a startling trick. It was variously performed. He went to the tree, and broke off a portion, which he placed in one of the empty vases. The other was filled in the like manner. They were scarcely in the vase when they likewise began to bloom. M. Decremps then took out the plants from the other vases, to show there was no connection between them, and on their being replaced they also blossomed and fruited before us. There was loud applause at this, for the plants had scarcely been replaced ere the flowers began to appear.

"Paligenesia," said M. Decremps, "or the art of regeneration, is a very old illusion. It may be performed in many ways. Here I have taken the simplest mode, but not on that account the least effective. The stem and branches of the nosegay or plant I make of rolled paper—*papier mâché* will answer the purpose, or pulp if you like—so that it is firm and

hollow. You may buy artificial leaves and stalks, or you may make them yourselves of parchment or paper. The fruit, flowers, and buds may be formed of oiled silk or goldbeater's skin, formed hollow, and they are attached to the hollow stems by silk thread, so that they expand when air is forced through the stems by a bellows, or, what is equally effective, a blown bladder fitted with a tap, to regulate the supply. The flowers and fruit are hidden till wanted in the ends of the stem and branches, or where the leaves are placed a little thicker than ordinary to hide them. The vases and tree are attached to a large double bellows, so that they could be filled instantaneously if necessary. In removing the flowers I deceived you, whilst it enabled me to turn the valve necessary to fill them. If I had a blown bladder in my coat-pocket and a tube to my wrist, it would have enabled me to perform the illusion at the other end of the room, or in your midst. I should also tell you," the old man continued, "that the swans move so regularly in consequence of a rotary motion being given to the water by a small side jet. The same current moves gently a rotary magnet beneath the bank, and so attracts the ducks along the brink."

M. Decremps now introduced his daughter, whose voice we had heard at the commencement, and directed our attention to the beautiful effect of the coloured rays on the scene, when the light of a powerful lamp was reflected through tinted glass. This accounted for the fairylike vision which first greeted our eyes. It now faded away, as a small vapouriser diffused a pleasant perfume through the room.

As the lights shone forth again on the quaint tapestry, which hid the scene from our view, we saw that Mademoiselle was blindfolded, in order, as her father explained, that we might see how easily the ignorant could be imposed upon. He produced a pack of cards, which he shuffled rapidly; stating, as he did so, that his daughter would be able to tell each card, from one end of the pack to the other, on their being cut and held by one of the company.

We were enabled to judge that Mademoiselle was effectually blindfolded, and her father, taking the cards, allowed each of us to cut them, lest it might be thought that there was some collusion between himself and Mademoiselle. The cards were so placed that all the audience could see them. Monsieur simply said that he should not speak whilst Mademoiselle named the cards. He inquired if she was ready. She replied "yes," and immediately told us the card uppermost, and so on through the rest of the pack as they were shown *seriatim*.

Monsieur stated to us that the whole secret depended on an arrangement

of the cards, which Mademoiselle knew beforehand. Cutting the cards, and when he was shuffling them, he merely cut them repeatedly, which never alters their arrangement. The first words that he uttered, were, in reality, an arranged signal to inform Mademoiselle the number of the card at the bottom of the pack, so that she could know what card was at the top, and so on, seriatim. This was, and is, the foundation of many pleasing illusions; but it should never be repeated in company, and the cards should be shuffled as soon as the experiment is at an end. The larger the room, and the more numerous the audience, the more effective this marvel is. This systematic arrangement of the cards enables the operator to tell at once what card has been drawn from the pack by a spectator, for, on the card being taken, he cuts the cards at the spot, and the bottom card gives him the necessary clue. Again and again can this be repeated, if the holder of the cards has a good memory, and, by a judicious scheme of signals, the names of the cards could be communicated to a distant assistant.

Our evening's entertainment was brought to a close by some wonderful experiments with the divining-rod; and, though many illusions have been produced since, there are some who yet retain a lively belief in the power of the rod to find water and minerals in unknown places. The experiments were curious, and more varied than those which Jonathan Oldbuck witnessed, so pleasantly related by Sir Walter Scott in the antiquary. These experiments will form another wonderful evening, when space and time admit of justice being done them and M. Decrempa.

It was a pleasant evening—a wonderful evening we thought it then—with the elucidator and professor of Natural Philosophy and Necromancy. We went home that evening much amused, and, since that period, many a time and oft since have I humbly imitated the author of *La Magie blanche dévoilée* and his Wonderful Christmas Party.



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