

Distorting Mirrors

BY L. S. LEWIS.

[From Photos. specially taken by George Newnes, Limited.]



EVER since the days of Pepper's Ghost, all kinds of "illusions" have been devised with the aid of mirrors, which, like the multiplication table, are capable of infinite combinations.

Some of our great "modern magicians," like Mr. Maskelyne, design their own effects and illusions; others do not, preferring to "buy of the maker." As a fact, there is in London a gentleman who makes it his business to devise all sorts of weird, uncanny effects with mirrors.

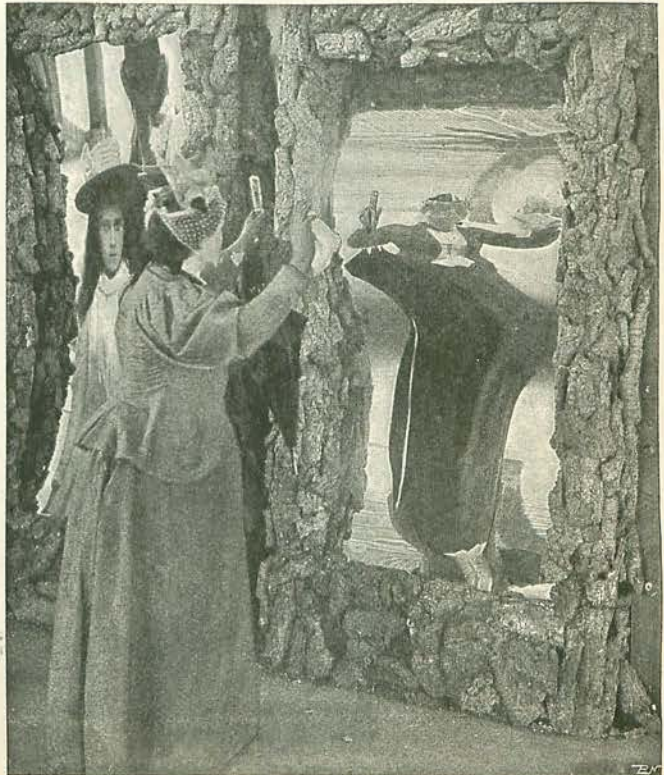
His name is Mr. E. J. Dale, and he has at his private residence a model stage, fitted with electric lamps. On this stage he patiently tries various effects, playing variations upon the lighting arrangements and the angles at which the mirrors are placed, until, at length, he gets some effect capable of being worked up into something novel and startling. Mr. Dale next makes a cardboard model of the entire scene, and then commences to work the thing out on a larger scale.

Now, obviously it would be a pretty costly business to be always breaking up glass mirrors into pieces of various shapes and sizes, so the illusion artist buys instead sheets of highly-polished zinc at 5s. each. This material he can cut about and bend backwards and forwards at will. Finally, when all arrangements have been decided upon, wooden moulds of the required mirrors are made and sent to the glass-bender's—usually to Mr. Newton, of Charles Street, Hatton Garden. In this way have originated many well-known successful illusions—the "headless," "bodiless," "disappearing," and other ladies; the wishing-well, into which one looks and sees one's future husband or wife; the angel's visit, and numerous other subjects—gruesome, curious, amusing, and beautiful.

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Quite naturally, then, Mr. Dale was one day struck with the idea of producing distorting mirrors, which, without the aid of draperies or stage mechanism of any kind, should prove an endless source of amusement to the vast crowds that flock to the great exhibitions of London. Accordingly, he set to work, and after calculating the curves to a nicety, he produced the "templates," or moulds, of two full-length mirrors. After many failures, the work being of unexampled difficulty, and quite without precedent, Mr. Newton, the well-known glass-bender, succeeded in producing five pairs, which were forthwith sent to Olympia by order of that prince of showmen, Mr. Joseph Lyons.

The first photo. shows the two mirrors. The one on the left is wholly concave, sweeping down in a lugubrious curve; and the other is convex at the top and concave at the bottom, thus giving a double image. A multitude of queer variations can be obtained



"WHAT A SIGHT I LOOK!" (BOTH MIRRORS SHOWN.)

by standing and stooping, advancing and receding. The figure of a little girl seen in the left-hand mirror is merely a reflection. The whole photo. is a capital snapshot by our own artist. The lady seen in front of the mirror has hastened up to it, unsuspecting, being desirous of arranging her hair or something of that sort. Her horror on beholding the quaint, zig-zag monstrosity in the glass is well depicted. The horror

and amazement of other people who accidentally happen upon these mirrors are likewise comical to witness.

The mirrors are $\frac{3}{8}$ in. thick, and measure about 7ft. by 3ft. They cost about £24 a pair to produce, and never was money better spent from the showman's point of view. Simply fixed to the wall and provided with a framework of rustic cork, they attracted curious crowds the whole day long. The idea was a master-stroke. We are all interested in ourselves—if you understand me—and we inspect with keen curiosity portraits or caricatures which depict us in various attitudes.

The crowds in front of these mirrors occasionally grew so unmanageable, that a stalwart policeman was stationed in front of each pair to move the people on after they had inspected themselves and posed in various ways, to their own satisfaction. Here is reproduced an average family group whose antics



AN AVERAGE FAMILY.

No one who has never seen a mixed crowd in front of these mirrors can even form an idea of the diversion they provide. Probably the funniest experience the Prince and Princess of Wales ever had was when they

stood in front of one of the many pairs at Olympia. Letters are frequently received by the designer (Mr. Dale) asking for quotations as to terms for the erection of distorting mirrors in private mansions and country houses. Noblemen and gentlemen who are sometimes at a loss to know what to do with their guests—say, on a wet day—might do worse than provide themselves with a 6ft. "long" and "short." Mr. Dale tells me that he has already fitted up several pairs in ancestral mansions, the total cost of each pair, inclusive of fitting and erecting, being about £50.

It was in the "long" concave mirror that our photographer obtained the quaint Rossetti-like effect seen in the next illustration.



THE FAMILY IN THE "LONG" MIRROR.

before the mirrors were "snapped" by our own photographer. Of course, these distorting mirrors affected people in different ways; but of this more hereafter.

The next photo. shows the family in the "long" mirror. The hat of paterfamilias has ascended clean out of this peculiar picture, but his smiling face sufficiently indicates the lengthening process. Notice the curious perspective of his finger.



A ROSSETTI EFFECT WITH TWO LITTLE GIRLS.

The child on the right has crossed her hands on her breast. Which reminds us that people of all ages and conditions try various effects for themselves. The reader need scarcely be told that the photographing of these reflected images was a difficult and delicate matter. Standing before the mirrors one could not only see one's person caricatured horribly, but by simply moving hither and thither, one could produce all kinds of fantastic and outlandish effects.

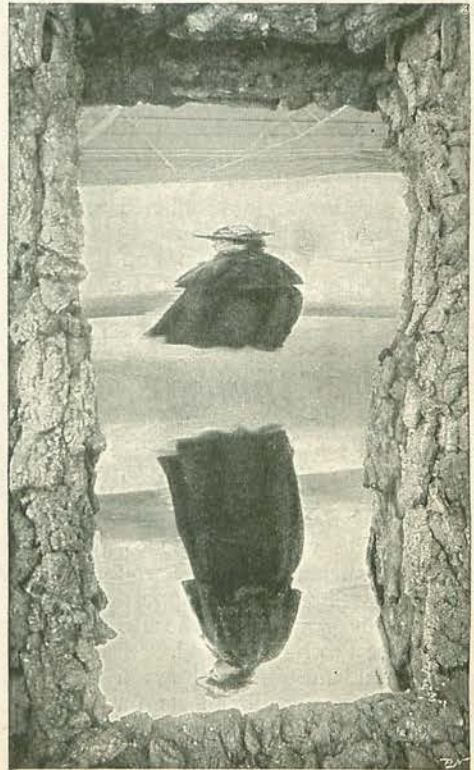
It was, however, very different with the camera. All sorts of nightmares flitted before the lens, and it was all but impossible to be certain whether or no the camera saw exactly the same picture as was seen by the subject himself. This is accounted for by the fact that the slightest movement on the part of the "sitter" completely altered the extravagant image in the mirror. Mr. Dale assured us that it had never previously occurred to any photographer to take these novel pictures. When approached on the subject, many declared it altogether impossible.

Here is reproduced a photo. of a lady of average height—of course, taken in the "short"

distorting mirror. Obviously the sharper the convexity, the more stunted and podgy the figure becomes. If this lady had stretched her hand out straight from her shoulder, it would have been prolonged horizontally in the most grotesque manner. The mirror indicates its tendency in this direction by lengthening the lady's nose.

These mirrors reflect a good deal of human nature. Tall, ungainly women have looked wistfully in the "short" glass, and wished earnestly that it were possible for the image reflected therein to become a tangible reality. Similarly, scores of more or less stout ladies have gazed in the "long" mirror, and then turned radiantly to their friends for opinions and remarks. The average girl—particularly the girl attended by her lover—avoided both mirrors as she would avoid the plague. In fact, no amount of persuasion could induce certain persons—dignified men, bashful youths, and others—to stand in front of these distorting glasses for any length of time.

Two small boys are next seen reflected in the concave mirror. Notice, again, the curious foreshortening of the hand and finger of the lad on the left. It was extremely amusing to watch the frolics of boys in front



A LADY SEEN IN THE "SHORT" MIRROR.



TWO SMALL BOYS.

of these glasses. They would dance, strike attitudes, pull faces, and try all sorts of queer experiments, partly for their own amusement, but partly also for the gratification of the crowd behind. Small boys are seldom afflicted with bashfulness on such occasions.

The mirrors saw great times on Bank Holidays. The jovial soul who comes forth in his boisterous thousands on such festivals—accompanied by a lady, equally demonstrative—was so struck with the latent possibilities of the thing that, after the first burst of uproarious glee, he set himself down to try sundry grotesque effects, with the simple gravity of a monkey. Also, he would pose the lady, with the result that his mirth would become so absolutely overwhelming that he would be obliged to fall back for support upon some elderly gentleman, whose disgust thereat is not to be described.

The next illustration shows a lady quietly trying certain effects for herself. This pair of mirrors is not quite the same as the pair previously shown. The one on the left is, as

before, convex at the top, and concave at the bottom; but the glass on the right, as one may judge from the photo., is a long, gently-curving convex glass. Both give virtually the same distortion. That is to say, both are shortening mirrors. There is this difference, however: the one on the left gives two images, whilst the long convex glass gives only one. Besides, in the upper part of the left-hand mirror the person is made considerably shorter than in the glass on the right-hand side.

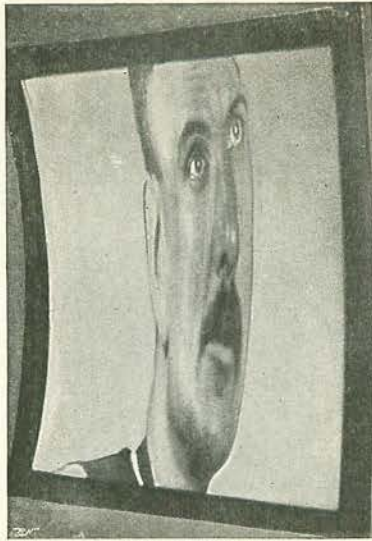
As might be supposed, shouts of laughter came continuously from the crowds in front of these curious "attractions." It was noticed that well-dressed people, apparently of the upper classes, did not care to look in the mirrors when other people were about. They manifested keen curiosity all the same, however, and when the coast was clear, as the saying is, they stole quietly in front, and regarded, with interest and amusement, their distorted images. They would also wave their arms, and make sly grimaces and strange contortions, precisely as some of the lower apes were seen to do under similar circumstances.



TRYING VARIOUS EFFECTS.

He was an ingenious man who put forward these mirrors as a kind of automatic and gratuitous "side-show"; but quite as much credit is due to the well-known *restaurateur*, Mr. Pearce, who saw in the mirrors (besides his own genial countenance) a unique and striking advertisement of his own dinners.

The fact is, Mr. Pearce ordered a large number of pairs of mirrors—convex and concave. These he had fixed up on either side of the doors of his restaurants, with the legend "Before dining at Pearce's" over the concave



"BEFORE DINING."



"AFTER DINING."

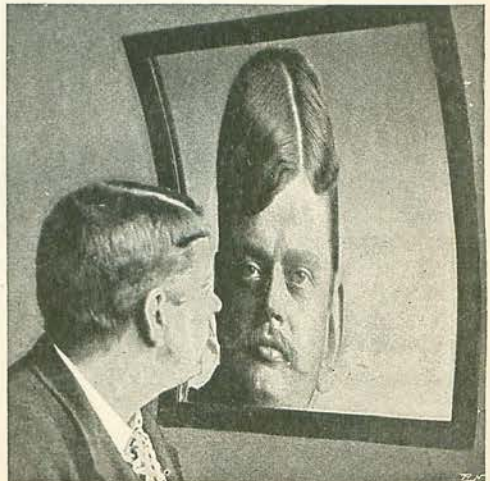
glass, and "After Dining" over the convex one.

The real humour of this novel advertisement will be better appreciated on glancing at the next photo., which was taken in the concave, or "Before Dining" mirror. The idea is delightful. Any passer-by who looks in this glass beholds his face like this—attenuated, agonized, half-starved. Surely no appearance could be more doleful. Well, you go in and dine, and on coming out, you gaze in the other mirror, the convex one. What you see is demonstrated in the accompanying photograph, which is a portrait of the self-same "Before Dining" gentleman. Now here we see a head and face like an animated pudding, a complacent, expansive smile (invariably caused by the image), and indications at the shoulders that

the diner has suddenly attained the proportions of a second Daniel Lambert. The curious part of the thing is that the mirrors are there, and you do the advertising yourself. So very much better than engaging a mournful man to distribute handbills—better even than the odious practice of puffing into the street a villainous, onion-laden steam, by way of reminding a man that he is hungry.

Here is another curious effect produced in the concave mirror. Notice the exaggerated length of the gentleman's hair-parting. Obviously these advertising mirrors cause many people to stop and look in them, even if they do not pay much attention to the persuasive legends above. These same legends, by the way, are now enamelled on iron and securely fastened on to their respective mirrors, thus obviating a possible disaster caused by small boys *changing the boards*—an unfortunate occurrence which happened more than once in the early days of the idea.

There is, indeed, no reason whatever why this most ingenious form of advertising should be monopolized by eating-house keepers. As a fact, the writer remembers seeing a pair fixed up

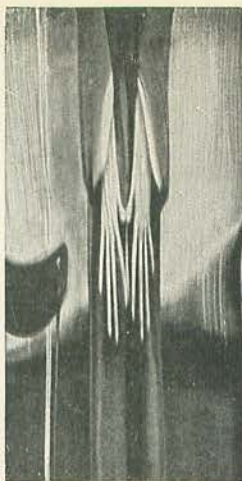


A QUEER EFFECT IN THE CONCAVE MIRROR.

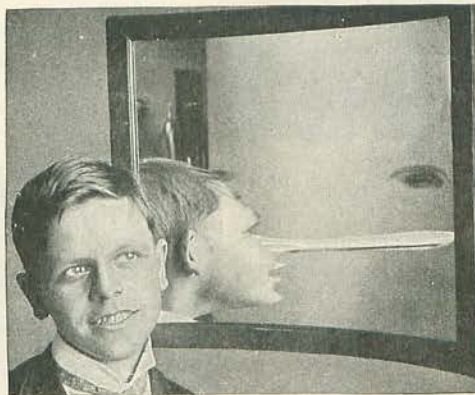
outside a travelling show, the legends being, of course, "Before" and "After" seeing the performance. Furthermore, the idea might also be extended to comic illustrated journalism—"Before" and "After" reading the various papers.

The accompanying reproduction depicts the author's hands, which were photographed by our artist, as a subject which should show the curious elongation, without any other effect being present to confuse the spectator. The author's body is seen encased in a tightly buttoned frock-coat, lengthened to such an extraordinary pitch, that one is at a loss to know what the long "streak" can possibly be.

The lad depicted in our last illustration is also grotesquely caricatured by the mirror. The original photograph from which the reproduction was made was taken in the same way as the preceding one. This is an exceedingly comic effect, the lad's profile being distorted in a perfectly diabolical manner. Notice the huge bulge of the cheek, the pointed chin, and above all the phenomenal nose, which stretches from one side of the mirror to the other. This will give some notion of the astonishingly grotesque effects that may be produced with a pair of these distorting mirrors.



THE AUTHOR'S HANDS.



AN EXTRAORDINARY CARICATURE.

Mr. Newton makes them, by the way; so do Messrs. Sage, of the Gray's Inn Road. The average size is about 24in. by 18in., and those with plain black beaded frames cost two guineas each. Very large sums, however, can be spent on mirrors for show purposes. The Crystal Maze at the Royal Aquarium is composed entirely of mirrors, and it cost over £1,000 to fit up.

Recent explorers have taken pairs of distorting mirrors with them to assist in obtaining "concessions" from the simple savage. And that the mirrors impress savages was made evident from the fact that when one of the Dahomey warriors

at Olympia accidentally came across the very pair that figures in the first part of this article, he rushed off for his comrades in a state of the wildest excitement. The exhibition was not open at the time. Rehearsals were going on. Before those mirrors, however, an absolutely unauthorized "rehearsal" took place. The warriors brought their weapons and went through strange and fearful war-dances in front of the glasses, until at length the uproar became so great that the officials had to come and lead the Dahomey gentlemen away from their own very much counterfeit presentments.