

Savile Clarke *Alice* Productions

The Wretchedly Bad Father William

The Mini Patter Song and the Magic Lantern Show

A Commentary by Matthew Demakos

Wretchedly and Disgracefully Bad

While Alice sang the words to “Father William” in the operetta version of the story, Lewis Carroll saw “two boys dressed after the pictures, the Father being acrobat enough to ‘stand on his head’” and to perform a cartwheel. (The latter took the place of the book version’s back-somersault, which was deemed impractical.) In this dumbshow performance—as Carroll described it in a letter—the boy playing Father William kicked the boy playing the Youth down the stairs. Naturally, the over-prissy Carroll was quite pleased that Alice was saved from executing such a kick: “*not* a very graceful thing for a little girl to do.”¹

Admittedly, this stage version of the poem only existed in Carroll’s fanciful mind. It was actually one of several demands he made regarding the 1888 revival of Walter Slaughter and Henry Savile Clarke’s operetta *Alice in Wonderland: A Dream Play for Children*. It was the fourth and last demand, and, oddly enough, the only one that dealt with stage action, all the other demands were about advertisements. If the four demands were met, with Carroll himself paying in part for some portion of the advertisements, he would invest £100 into the production.

Two years before, in the original version of the play, the audience was treated to a magic lantern show during the song. These “dissolving view effects” were created by John Bateman & Company. Magic Lanterns were, simply put, early slide shows. The cameras that cast the image onto the screen could either have one, two, or three lenses. Multiple lenses allowed one picture to dissolve into another. Common scenes included a day scene slowly dissolving into a night scene. But slides also had moving parts (multiple pieces of glass) allowing the audience to observe animated images. These slides contained levers and little cranks for spinning a layer or section of the slide. A mouse could be seen crawling up a bed and into a snoring man’s

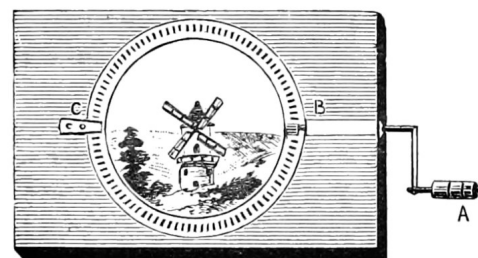
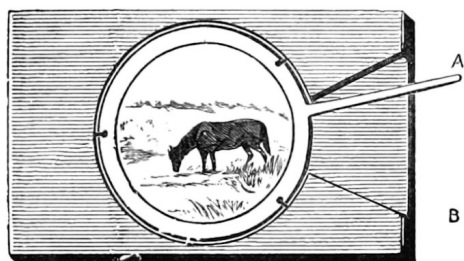
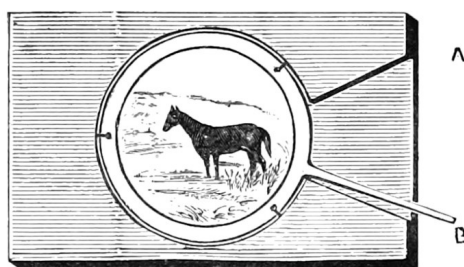
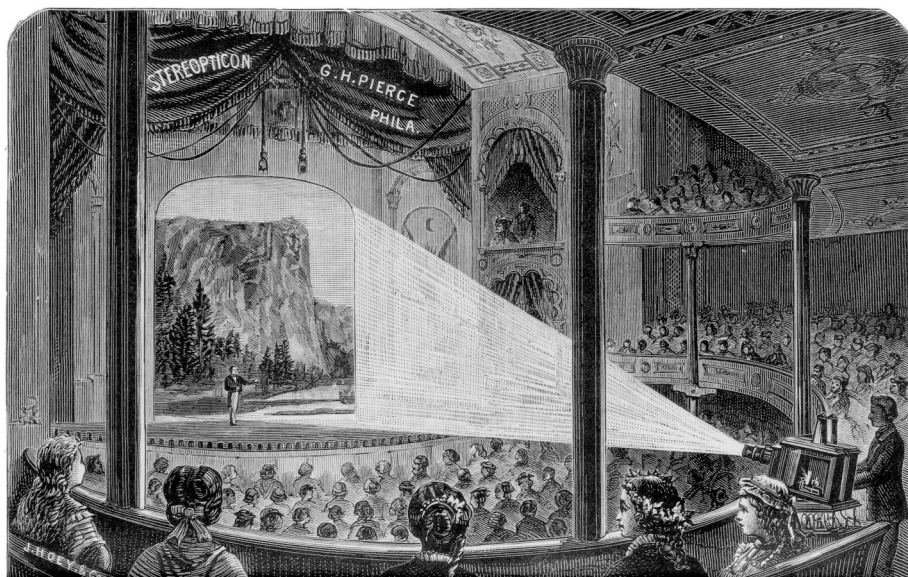
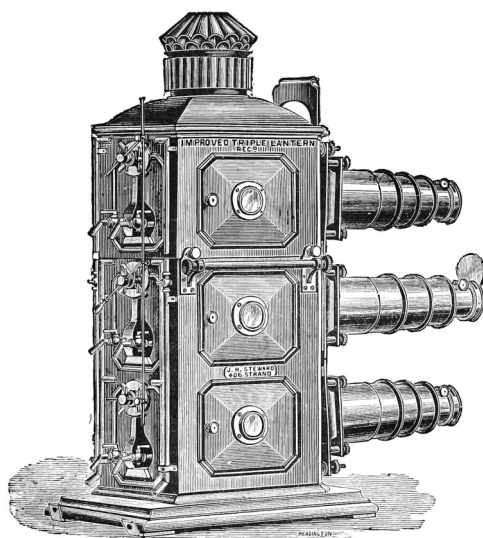


Figure 1: A triple lantern, from T. C. Hepworth's *The Book of the Lantern*, 1888 (top left); a magic lantern show, from *Illustrated Catalogue of Stereopticons, Magic Lanterns...* (published by Geo. H. Pierce), December 1888 (top right); and two moving slides, from *The Magic Lantern* by "A Practiced Hand", 1888 (bottom). The first two images depict a single lever slide, with the lever allowing the horse's head to move. The third depicts a rackwork slide (rotary glass slide), with the crank allowing the blades of the windmill to spin.

mouth. Snow could be seen falling and, with the help of another slide, could be seen to turn a once-uncovered cottage into a snow-covered cottage.

In the mid 1850s, Lewis Carroll himself bought a magic lantern to entertain children. "I introduced 13 songs," he wrote about his first exhibition, "six for myself, and seven for the children; and employed seven different voices."²

In his diary, Carroll criticized his own performance, and, years later, in letters to Henry Savile Clarke, he criticized the operetta's performance. "Magic Lantern is (excuse the phrase) *wretchedly* bad," he wrote, concerning the "Father William" episode. In a second letter, Carroll amended his rebuke to "*disgracefully* bad."³ At least one reviewer disagreed with Carroll, declaring that "the abrupt changes" in the song "had an exquisitely ludicrous effect."⁴

From other reviewers, we can only state a few details about the staging. "The green Caterpillar sat smoking its hookah on the mushroom and made Alice recite, 'You are old, Father William,' while the foliage in the background opened, and there we saw the old man turning his somersaults, standing on his head, balancing the eel on his nose, kicking his son downstairs." And from another, we learn "Alice looks at these views, as does the caterpillar, in wondering amaze."⁵

Whether the illustrations were projected from the rear or the front is unknown. It would seem slicker and more professional to project them from the rear, with the gadgetry and operators out of view of the audience. There may not have been enough room in the back of the stage, however, to project a large image. Perhaps more importantly, the music suggests that we are seeing a show-within-a-show (as we argue below) and having the operation in full view may have been seen to accentuate that concept. Nonetheless, though it is completely unknown, the images may have been painted-glass versions of Tenniel's originals.

It is unclear when the magic lantern show was removed from the song. It appears in the 1888 stage-hand version of the operetta (Richards Collection): “Gong all lights down and limes. Magic Lantern.” However, beneath and in a different hand, are the words: “Played now *without* Magic Lantern which is not necessary.”⁶

Carroll used the omission in the revival, despite his disdain for the scene, to get a bit prickly with the management's cheapness, especially when it came to advertising the operetta. “I see they are now economical enough to omit the Magic Lantern for ‘Father William,’” Carroll wrote Savile Clarke. “If *economy* [read *stinginess*] will bring in money for you, I hope you will get lots. I should think this omission will save *at least* a penny a day.”⁷ No, inflation is not the issue; Carroll is being a wiseass!

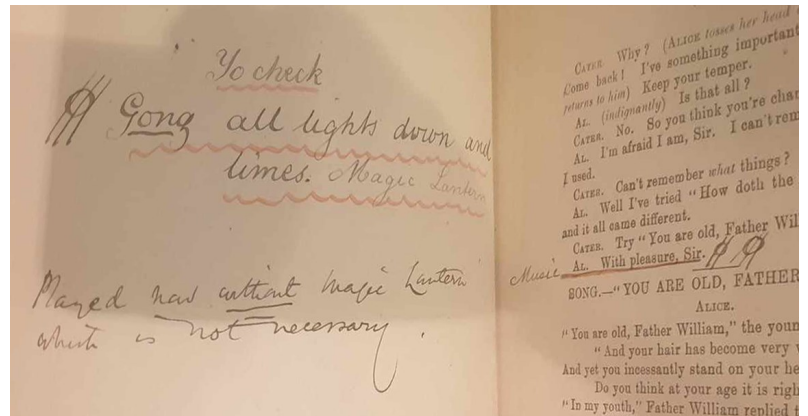


Figure 2: Stage directions for “Father William,” Prompt Copy of the 1888 Libretto, from the Richards Collection, stating to remove the magic lantern. Since the magic lantern appeared in the 1888 prompt copy of the libretto, it was likely, at first, planned to appear in the production. However, since it was not mentioned in the program, as it was for 1886, the note to remove it was likely written *before* the 1888 premiere.

The Music: Don't Give yourself Airs!

One reviewer described Walter Slaughter's music to “Father William” as “a sort of miniature patter song,”⁸ which seems apt enough. The words do somewhat come at a steady, non-stop rate, as in patter songs, and the tempo was likely a tad slower than Gilbert and Sullivan would have performed it. Indeed, it is marked to play “vivace,” which means “lively and fast,” but not as fast as presto or prestissimo. Since the poem is in tuple meter (anapest), Slaughter similarly used a tuple meter (6/8). This allowed the words to flow out in a constant and even stream, a requirement of the patter song.

Performing the poem in the form of a patter song is, artistically speaking, a no-brainer. The patter song emphasizes beats and rhythm, and Alice is in that mode as a reciter, using beats

Section	Lyric	Quoted Character	Featured Instrument	First & Final Chord (Tone)	Opening Melody Shape
A, B	[Instrumental Forte Introduction]				
C	“You are old, father William,” the young man said, “And your hair has become very white; And yet you incessantly stand on your head— Do you think, at your age, it is right?”	Son	Violin Flute	F (F) C (G)	
D	“In my youth,” father William replied to his son, “I feared it might injure the brain; But, now that I’m perfectly sure I have none, Why, I do it again and again.”	Father	Violin Bassoon	F (A) C (C)	
E	“You are old,” said the youth, “as I mentioned before, And have grown most uncommonly fat; Yet you turned a back-somersault in at the door— Pray, what is the reason of that?”	Son	Oboe Violin	Gbdim (C) F (A)	
F	“In my youth,” said the sage, as he shook his grey locks, “I kept all my limbs very supple By the use of this ointment—a shilling the box— <i>Pray, allow me to sell you a couple.</i> ”	Father	Winds (sans flute)	Cm6/Eb (A) C (C)	
G	<i>Pray, allow me to sell you a couple.</i> <i>Pray, allow me to sell you a couple.</i> <i>By the use of this ointment—a shilling the box— Pray, allow me to sell you a couple.</i>			F (A) F (F)	[Random, Mixed, leaps]
H	[Instrumental Forte Segue]	[All above is repeated below]			
C	“You are old,” said the youth, “and your jaws are too weak For anything tougher than suet; Yet you finished the goose, with the bones and the beak— Pray, how did you manage to do it?”	Son	Violin Flute	F (F) C (G)	
D	“In my youth,” said his father, “I took to the law, And argued each case with my wife; And the muscular strength, which it gave to my jaw, Has lasted the rest of my life.”	Father	Violin Bassoon	F (A) C (C)	
E	“You are old,” said the youth, “one would hardly suppose That your eye was as steady as ever; Yet you balanced an eel on the end of your nose— What made you so awfully clever?”	Son	Oboe Violin	Gbdim (C) F (A)	
F	“I have answered three questions, and that is enough,” Said his father; “don’t give yourself airs! Do you think I can listen all day to such stuff? Be off, or I’ll kick you down stairs!”	Father	Winds (sans flute)	Cm6/Eb (A) C (C)	
G	<i>Be off, or I’ll kick you down stairs!”</i> <i>Be off, or I’ll kick you down stairs!”</i> <i>Do you think I can listen all day to such stuff? Be off, or I’ll kick you down stairs!”</i>			F (A) F (F)	[Random, Mixed, leaps]
H	[Instrumental Forte Coda]				

Figure 3: The above chart summarizes the structure of the song. The added lyrics, when compared to the book version, are presented in italics. Alice’s vocal line is sung in unison with the “Featured Instrument,” excepting in section F, where the winds hold a long chord. The second to last column shows the opening and final chord and tone for each eight-bar section. The last column replicates the shape of the melody.

and rhythm to help her remember the correct words. In many cases, when setting words in strict meter to music, composers try to *unemphasize* the beats, to make the whole less predictable or monotonous. But the mechanical nature of a child reciting, as in this case, is aptly brought out by using the form. Simply put, the limitations in mechanical recitation parallels the limitations inherent in patter songs themselves.

Section A: The song begins with a four-bar forte, performed by the whole of the orchestra, complete with the percussionist pounding his bass drum and smashing his cymbal. This grandiose gesture may seem out of character with the song. But Slaughter is reacting to two different matters on the stage. First, the music announces the change of scene, one from a forest to that of an entertainment. With the lights dimming and the background foliage opening, the audience suddenly understands that they are going to see a show-within-a-show, namely, a magic lantern show. In short, the forte (which sounds rather circus-like) acts as a mini overture.

Second, the music aptly fits Alice’s response to the Caterpillar’s demand to repeat “Father William.” Showing no signs of hesitation and having not an ounce of timidity, Alice states with great confidence “With pleasure, Sir.”⁹ She has become, quite surprisingly to the audience, the charismatic master of ceremonies, or better yet, the attention-loving main attraction. This is all stated in the music, and with Alice herself, no doubt, posturing with chin held high, affecting the appearance of a star. Despite the grandiose nature, interestingly, Slaughter’s music does not mock the little girl nor the scene itself; it simply gives it a setting.¹⁰

Section B: After the forte, the winds and the strings vamp on a single repeated bar. It is marked “repeat ad lib,” meaning to repeat until the singer begins. Since playing the measure two or four times would make the section sound “written,” in our rendition (see our pdf version of the score) we have the orchestra playing the measure an unexpected, and perfectly unmusical, three times.¹¹



Figure 4: One of five magic lantern slides for the “Father William” episode, from the The National Media Museum, Bradford. The first four are colorations of Tenniel’s illustrations, photographed onto the glass. The accompanying video depicts the fifth slide, a depiction of Father William kicking the Youth down the stairs. These still, non-moving images, were animated by the author to create the accompanying video.

Section C: As is common in patter songs, Alice sings a repeating zig-zagging, scalar melody (the same as the instrumental vamp in the above section) for the first two lines of the poem.



For the final two lines, Slaughter repeats the melody, but sequences it a whole step higher. Slaughter's melody, a repetition within a repetition, accentuates the dreary, mechanical nature of recitation. Even the resulting F-sharp note, a non-diatonic note (not in the original key), gives the whole a *ho-hum* weariness.

For this verse, about the Youth, Alice is accompanied in the melody by the violins for the first two lines, and by the flute for the last two lines. Including the vocal melody in the accompaniment may have been a way to guide young singers.

Section D: As is also common in patter songs, Alice sings an up-down melody for the first two lines of the second verse. In this case, three up and three down. (The pattern is only broken by the masculine ending poetic lines.)



Again, Slaughter's melody, predictable and plain, only emphasizes the rote nature of recitation. Slaughter begins the second half with the same melody but breaks off by the second measure, perhaps believing that he has stretched the monotony as far as the listeners can tolerate.

For this verse, about the father, Alice is accompanied as before, but with the bassoon taking over for the flute. This is an interesting touch, having the Youth represented by the higher flute and the Father by the lower bassoon. Also, the bassoon often plays comic roles, which befits the Father's bizarre behavior.

Section E: Interestingly, for the third verse of the song, Slaughter combines the zig-zag melody of section C with the up-down melody of section D, along with the sequencing



found in the two. (Sequencing refers to the playing of the same melody in higher or lower positions in the scale.) As usual, he finds it necessary to break the pattern in the last few bars.

As this verse quotes the Youth, Alice is accompanied by the oboe and the flute, two of the higher wind instruments.

Section F: Suddenly, the music quiets down and Alice, or Father Williams, speaks in a monotone whisper. He actually sings an A note thirteen times in a row! This is followed by an



equally long string of G notes, only interrupted midstream by a high-popping C. Alice (in the role of Father William) is accompanied solely by the woodwinds. Perhaps to emphasize the older figure, Slaughter omits the flute, the highest wind instrument in his arrangement. As he has done in the previous two sections, to end the verse, Slaughter abandons the monotony and gives us a less predictable, yet scalar melody.

Section G: Carroll’s verses lack a chorus and so Slaughter creates one by employing the last two lines of the above verse. This is a common practice, and one that appears to have been done for “The Oyster’s Revenge Song.”¹² As expected for a chorus, the melody becomes less predictable and more memorable—something for the theatergoer to whistle on the way home. In fact, there are six leaps in the melody in only eight bars (including two fourths, two fifths, a sixth, and even an eighth).

As expected, our makeshift chorus receives the full attention of the orchestra, a fullness that was only accentuated by having the winds-only section, the softest section of the whole of the song, appear directly before. According to one reviewer, Alice was “helped out by the Caterpillar”¹³ in the chorus. This is not indicated in the librettos, the piano-vocal score, or the conductor’s score. Though a possibility, it makes little sense as the Caterpillar is supposed to be judging Alice’s accuracy. “It’s wrong from beginning to end,” he states after the recitation. Then again, many choruses hardly make sense in this regard, from Broadway to rock and pop.

As shown in figure 3, both the melody and chord sequences finally end in F, the key and main tone of the song. That is, only now do we have a full resolution.

The Repeat: At this point, the forte is reintroduced and the whole is repeated with verses three and four. The conductor’s score clearly indicates (with the use of a segno marking) that the vamp is *not* to be repeated the second time around. In our rendition, we have been *unfaithful* to this marking. It simply sounds too satisfying not to reintroduce it. Plus, it is very possible that it was repeated despite the score.

The song ends with a repeat of the forte. It is possible that Alice’s confident, charismatic, head-held-high performance was immediately undercut with the Caterpillar’s assessment: “That is not right.” Alice immediately deflates—drooping her arms, slumping her shoulders, and dropping her head—and the audience chuckles and applauds. Thus, we have a third reason for the grand forte—humor.



Figure 5: The vamp for the “Father William” song in the conductor’s score, from The National Library of Australia. The direction “Repeat ad lib” allows Alice to enter when ready. The segno (the swirly S-figure) indicates that the vamp is not to be repeated before the fifth verse. We have decided, however, to repeat the vamp in our version—it simply sounds to good not to.

Closing Arguments (With the Wife)

Carroll would never see the dumbshow version.¹⁴ In less than three weeks after he wrote his demands, the operetta closed. How the “Father William” scene was performed in subsequent productions is not known, though it was likely not in dumbshow or with a magic lantern. No

About the Video and the Magic Lantern Show

In the accompanying video, we include the vocal line and the lyric only in a “bouncing ball” version of the music with Slaughter’s score heard but unseen. The reenactment of the magic lantern show is not to be taken too seriously. There has been no attempt to replicate the blemishes or imperfections that would likely appear, for example, when projecting black on black from one slide with two pieces of moving glass.

With that stated, we have restricted ourselves to the “laws of light” and the mechanical limitations of the lanterns when animating characters. We imagine a three-lens camera with an operator for each lens. Each operator is responsible for closing and opening his own lens and slipping in the slides and moving the levers about to the musical cues. Though we maintain that our show is possible, it may be a bit of a tour-de-force for the time, and perhaps, realistically speaking, needs to be slightly simplified in places.

The artwork derives from actual magic lantern slides from the period (see figure 4), ones that are non-movable, that is, ones that are simply still pictures. These images may have been part of the magic lantern show Lewis Carroll attended three times in 1876, but this is debatable.¹⁶ This show, at the Royal Polytechnic, was George Buckland’s *Alice’s Adventures; or The Queen of Hearts and the Missing Tarts*. The artist may have been William Robert Hill, though again, this is debatable.¹⁷

What appearance did the operetta’s “Father William” scene likely have? If we combine one reviewer’s use of the adjective “abrupt”¹⁸ with Carroll’s “wretchedly bad” and “disgracefully bad,” it intimates that the show used “lever pivoting slides” and “slipping slides,” many of which only *suggest*—in an *abrupt* manner—movement.¹⁹ In these slides, a man with a lowered cricket bat (below, top), for example, can suddenly have it blacked out when the operator slides out one of the layers of glass (below, bottom), which also allows another raised bat to appear. Since the second layer is pulled over the image, the images slide in and out unnaturally. Perhaps we can see a critique of this effect in another reviewer’s description of the

scene. “The verses are illustrated by moving views at the back,” the reviewer began, though adding, “I mean ‘moving’ in the sense that they change according to the verses.” Thus, the reviewer was compelled to point out that “moving” does not actually mean “moving” but “changing.”²⁰

Though one may interpret this reviewer’s statement differently, I have little doubt that some Victorians—Carroll being one of them—found the jerky nature of these slides to have been somewhat lame as we do today. They are often “abrupt” and “wretchedly bad” in suggesting “moving” elements. (Though it may have been more authentic for the accompanying video, I did not wish to spend time reproducing mediocrity.)



reviews or programs list the roles of Father William or the Youth and, though magic lanterns were used in several productions, they were not associated with the song.

Admittedly, and if I may end on a private note, I decided to electronically engrave Slaughter's setting because I found the music to be "*wretchedly* bad." This was my judgement after listening to all of the *Alice in Wonderland* tunes in the 1906 piano-score as played by a synthesized piano.¹⁵ I figured if the worst sounding song—cloying as it may be in an electronic, soulless rendition—actually turned out to be enjoyable or even reasonably palatable, then I will be able to proclaim that the whole of the operetta is likely a worthy piece of theatrical art. My conclusion? Walter Slaughter and Henry Savile Clarke's operetta *Alice in Wonderland: A Dream Play for Children*—which did play for several decades—is indeed an *enormously* worthy piece of theatrical art.

Notes

The accompanying score (in pdf) is largely self explanatory. To allow others to shape the music as they see fit, I have included all details from the scores which could lead to various interpretations. Since electronic versions of scores can only have one version played back, of course, it is my interpretation that is heard in the accompanying video. The most significant This is especially so in the choice of dynamics (the loudness of a section or instrument).

The dynamics (the loudness and softness of a section or instrument), deserves a special note. If the scores indicate *p* (soft) for a certain instrument, for example, and if that instrument sounds unheard, I have no hesitancy to louden it to *mp*, *mf*, or *f* (moderately soft, moderately, loud, or loud), if need be. Though these changes can be made in my program unseen, it is rather cumbersome to do so. Nonetheless, as stated, the score allows musicians and conductors to see the original marking and to shape the music, in dynamics or otherwise, as they see fit.

1. Carroll to Henry Savile Clarke, January 25, 1889, Berol Collection, New York University.
2. Carroll "chose" a magic lantern, one by Watkin and Hill, on December 13, 1856, and his "first exhibition" was two and a half weeks later on December 31. See Edward Wakeling, *Lewis Carroll's Diaries* (Luton, Beds: The Lewis Carroll Society, 1994), pp. 123, 127–8.
3. Carroll to Clarke, January 8 and February 2, 1887, Berol Collection, New York Public Library. Thanks to Clare Imholtz for finding letters related to the "Father William" poem.
4. *The London Daily News*, December 24, 1886, p. 3.
5. *St Nicholas* 15, No. 3, January 1888, pp. 180–189; and *The Boston Herald*, March 27, 1887, p. 17.
6. It is possible to read Carroll's letter as if the magic lantern was removed between January 3 and 7, 1889, the two dates he saw the operetta before writing. However, the magic lantern was likely removed from the scene during rehearsals as stated in the caption for figure 2.
7. Carroll to Clarke, January 8, 1889, Berol Collection.
8. *Liverpool Daily Post*, April 12, 1887, p. 5.
9. Henry Savile Clarke, *Alice in Wonderland: A Dream Play for Children* [libretto] (London: The Court Circular, 1886), p. 9. All references to the text of the play derive from this source unless otherwise noted.
10. For what it may be worth, in a later production of the operetta, a reviewer wrote that the lead actress "sang 'You are old, Father William,' most charmingly, her facial expression being excellent." This may be a hint that the lead affected the appearance of a star. See *The Sporting Gazette*, December 24, 1898, p. 10.
11. This vamp appears cleanly written in the 1887 conductor's score but only as a correction in the

- 1900 part scores. Evidently, it was once removed. The 1906 piano-vocal score kept it removed.
12. The repeated lines to “Father William” do not appear in the librettos. The repeated lines in what we may call “The Oyster’s Revenge Song” do appear. However, in *The Annotated Walrus*, I argue that the repeats in the latter were likely added by Slaughter.
 13. *Liverpool Daily Post*, April 12, 1887, p. 5.
 14. Carroll’s idea to have “The Walrus and the Carpenter” performed in dumbshow was also rejected by Clarke. See Carroll to Clarke, September 2, 1886, Berol Collection.
 15. See The Gilbert and Sullivan Archive website and their British Musical Theatre section: <https://www.gsarchive.net/british/alice/index.html>. These digital files were created by Colin Johnson.
 16. That these slides may not have been a part of Buckland’s show was pointed out to me by Catherine Richards.
 17. The slides are held by the The National Media Museum, Bradford, along with other slides that are indisputably from the Buckland’s production. Technically, the museum does not claim these slides are Buckland’s, though they are in a set with Buckland’s “The House That Jack Built.” Many of the slides are Tenniel’s illustrations photographed onto the glass with an artist adding color (as our first four slides). Some are Tenniel’s illustrations without the cross-hatching but in black outline, cartoon style. And others have a more painterly style (as in our last slide of Father William kicking the Youth down the stairs).
 18. *The London Daily News*, December 24, 1886, p. 3.
 19. This is not to suggest that *all* lever pivoting slides and slipping slides are jerky; some are rather effective.
 20. *The Boston Herald*, March 27, 1887, p. 17.

