

Sarah Roberts, "An Hour in a Daguerrian Gallery," (fiction) 1855

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AN HOUR IN A DAGUERRIAN GALLERY.

BY SARAH ROBERTS.

I STROLLED the other day into a daguerrian gallery; and, after amusing myself with looking round on the numerous faces, old and young, beautiful and ugly, that decorated the walls, and conjuring up the various characters they represented, I threw myself on a corner of the sofa and for the sake of amusement watched the many groups that one after another passed in and out.

"This is truly the democratic, the levelling age of every thing," said I to myself. "In years gone by, to procure the precious likeness of a friend was only in the power of those who had great wealth at command; but now, in the twinkling of an eye, for a single dollar, the humblest citizen can possess the treasure. Wonderful discovery! Kind, blessed power!"

I was roused from my reflections by hearing a slow, heavy footfall on the stairs. The door opened; and a young man with an honest, sunburnt face, in a sailor's best dress, fathom of black ribbon and all, with a reeling gait as if just from shipboard, entered. A smile of great satisfaction beamed on his broad, good-natured face; and he was leading by the hand a small, humble, quiet-looking old lady, poorly but very neatly dressed. He seated her most tenderly in a chair quite near me; and at a second glance I perceived she was blind. She appeared to be very old, and trembled much from fatigue and weakness. The sailor looked upon her with much affection and delight, and, approaching the artists, said,—

"Can you make a picture of her, mister? I hope she is not too old, or that her being blind won't make any difference; her eyes are open, you see, and look as good as yours or mine, though the dear old soul has been blind these twenty years. Please to try, sir; for you see she is my mother; and I have plenty of money to pay for it; and I must have her dear old face to take away with me; and she wants you to take mine, for me to leave with her—for I am just going to take a long voyage, sir. Though she cannot see, she says she can hold it in her hand and kiss it, and know that it is me. I am her only child, sir—all she has left out of a husband and ten children. She wept herself blind, they told me, when I was an infant; for I am the youngest, and all the world to her now."

Jack's garrulity was stopped by the artist's requesting him to seat his mother before the camera; and he was loud in his praises at the success.

Next entered—O, such a pleasant group!—a young couple, followed by a nurse bearing a lovely child of about a year and a half old in her arms. Well might they wish to have perpetuated the remembrance of such a beautiful child—large, dark, full eyes; soft, golden curls; and that expression of angelic purity seen only in infancy. A fanciful little chair, richly carved and cushioned, was brought in to hold the treasure. How happy they all looked! The mother was very youthful and scarcely less beautiful than the child. “How long will this felicity last?” thought I. “Will this sweet child be torn from their fond embrace and consigned to an early grave, or will he in after years bring agony and shame to the hearts of those who have cherished him? Or will all their fond imaginings be realized? God only knows. How pleased they looked as they propped up the little darling in his pretty chair!—the young mother, now arranging this curl, now the dress, now displaying to more advantage the dimpled shoulder and arm, and now the tiny naked foot, encouraging by tender words the timid infant. All was at last satisfactorily arranged; and I heard the parents say, when it was finished, it was almost as pretty as wee Willie. My blessing went with the sweet child and the happy pair as they left the room.

A tall, gentlemanly man now entered, holding in his arms a delicate, frail-looking little girl about four years old. He was dressed in a suit of deep mourning; and the sad expression of his refined and noble countenance told that grief was in his heart. “A widower,” thought I, “and his only child;” and I think I was not mistaken. The little creature was most richly and exquisitely dressed; and her almost baby face seemed also to wear an expression of sadness. “No mother, poor little one,” mused I; “you have lost what can never be replaced.” As if in reply to my thoughts, she clung closely round her father’s neck. “Ah, love him, cling closely to him while you can; man’s nature is not woman’s; business, pleasure, power, and other love than yours will soon fill his heart, now yours alone. Other ties will be his; the first love may pass into forgetfulness and her child into neglect; but I hope better things for thee, sweet Nelly,”—for so her father called her; “but should the time come, this miniature of thy delicate, loving, tender childhood may bring back the warm blood to his estranged heart.

“Country lovers,” I said to myself, as the door opened, and a sunburnt, hard-working man entered, all in his Sunday best, which made him feel and move rather awkwardly, followed by a round, cherry-cheeked damsel, looking modestly on the ground, with many an extra ribbon and flower decorating her really rustic beauty. After various preliminaries,—

“How will you be taken?” inquired the artist.

“O, side by side, *of course*,” answered the man. “Susey and I always sits side by side whenever we can’ don’t we, Susey?” said he, taking her hand with great gallantry to lead her to the seat. “Why, don’t the tyown’s folks know that Susey and I has kept company now going on these two year? I don’t like such leetle uns as them,” he continued, pointing to some of the miniatures. “Make us pretty big, can’t you? If you must stint either on us, why, stint me a leetle and don’t stint Susey, that’s all. I don’t want to lose none on her; she is too harndsome for that—ain’t you, Susey?” said he, giving her a loud smack on her rosy cheek, which brought the blood rushing into Susey’s face.

“If you do that agin, John,” she said, “you sha’n’t have my face made on your picter at all; and how you’ll look sitting all alone on a picter—such a homely man as you are!”

“That would be bad enough, to be sure,” said John. “Well, I will wait until we get home to give one to the other cheek.”

“Please sit perfectly still,” requested the artist.

“Hand so we are,” answered John. “But I suppose we can talk a leetle, just to kill time, as I suppose we’ll have to sit here till sundown.”

“Please not even to speak,” said the artist.

“Will, that’s pretty hard, sitting so nigh Susey; but I’ll try,” was the answer.

They sat perfectly quiet, hand in hand; and in the usual time the plate was taken from the camera.

“You may rise now, if you choose,” said the artist.

“What for?” asked the man. “I told you we wanted to be taken sitting side by side and hand in hand, so as, when we grow old, we might remember how we courted under the old apple tree and by the fireside. If you can’t take us to suit ourselves, I’ll hire the job done somewhere else.”

“It is done,” answered the artist. “Wait a few moments.”

“Done! That you can’t make me believe,” said John. “‘Stonishing how these city folks thinks we country folds are all fools; but I’ll let you know, mister, I am called a rale cute un in our parts. ‘There’s no cheating John Simpson,’ every body says. Susey and I got up early this morning; and I got Tom to do my work, and Susey go Molly to do hern. And a rale lot we both have to do; for Susey is a rale smart un about house, and so is I about the farm; and we rode fourteen miles to come here to get our faces made, because we sawed un that you took here of Judy Smith and Phil Hayes—only Judy ain’t half so harndsome as my Susey; and now you want to cheat us out of it, hurrying of us over in this style as if we warn’t nobody. I’ll pay you, mister, just as much as your fine city folks that owns these faces all over your walls; and one folk’s money is as good as another folk’s money. I choose to set a proper spell. Why, I just got to putting on my best ‘spression—the one Susey told me to: kyind o’ so; and you say we may get up. ‘Taint fair, nohow you can fix it. Well, mister, I shan’n’t pay whole price without I sits long enough to pay for it.’”

The good-natured artist looked much amused, and could not refrain from laughter.

“You may laugh, sir,” said John; “but we country folks knows a thing or two. You can’t cheat an old crow.”

The artist left the man talking to finish the daguerreotypes, and in due time returned and presented it to him.

“Land o’ mercy, Susey!” he exclaimed, his face beaming with delight, “if there ain’t you and me! How did you get us, mister? I know Judy and Phil told you how we looked when they was down; and so you got it all ready for us to surprise us with. Well, you have just hit it; and you are a bright un. Shake hands, mister. O land, how natrel we do look—‘specially Susey! Susey, you are a beautiful picter; and I ain’t none of the ugliest—bees I, Susey, with my Sabbadays on? I looks like a gentleman, for sartin, ‘cept that my hands is rather bigger than some I’ve seen; but that’s a trifle. But there’s no lady in the land can beat you for good looks, Susey, and day. Well, it warn’t fair in Phil and Judy to tell you how we looked. I sha’n’t tell you how any more on us looks down our way, because you’ll be taking on ‘em to sell; and nobody wants their faces sold all over the world for folks to make their fortins by. How much longer must we stay here, mister? Bein’s you got our picter all ready for us, can we go putty soon?”

“Certainly,” said the artist, “as soon as you have paid for it.”

“Well, upon the whole, sir,” said the countryman, pulling out a small greasy wallet, “I’m ‘bliged to you for getting it ready agin we come; only, if you’ve got any more on ‘em, just leave out Susey,—can’t you?—or else all the fellers in town will be a-comin’ down to find her out, and may be turn her head and get her away from me. Sich things

has happened in books, you know—I'm a *leetle* of a scholar," he continued, giving the artist the squint as if he meant he was a good deal of a one. "Well, Susey dear, we shall have a nice frolic to-day in the city—time enough for us to see the wax-work, and the dancing monkeys, and the giant, and the larned pig, and get some oysters, and ice cream, and all the good things city folks eat. Come along, Susey, my angel; we will make a day of it. Good day, mister; when this is worn out we will call agin."

As they were bowing and courtesying hand in hand out of the door backwards in true country style they stumbled on a group of schoolgirls, who came bounding into the room in the heyday of spirits and glee. There were six of them—what a pretty group!

"You must take us all on one plate, Mr. W.," said several, speaking at once.

"I want to sit by Kate," said one.

"And Cora and I want to sit together," said another.

The artist glanced with pleasure at the young fair faces, and asked them to be seated.

"You must group us in the way we shall look the best, and tell us how to sit gracefully," said another little fairy, throwing herself in a chair in the most graceful attitude possible. How long they were arranging themselves! The artist called upon me for an opinion as to the grouping; and I was glad of the chance to scan the bright and lovely faces. We succeeded in arranging them satisfactorily to all; but several attempts failed. Cora's large dark eyes looked small and light, or Bertha's soft blue ones dark and large; or Kate laughed at the wrong time and declared her pretty mouth looked like a trapdoor; Minna's was squint, or Ellen's nose was crooked, It was evident they came there as much for a frolic as for any thing. When they had almost exhausted the artist's patience they contrived to sit still, and procured an accurate and beautiful picture. I would have like it myself, and asked the saucy little things most humbly to sit for one for my benefit. But even at fourteen the woman is too chary of her favors to throw them away lightly; and I was peremptorily and unanimously refused. How gayly they chatted and laughed as they descended the stairs! I listened until the last sound of their girlish voices died away, and sighed; for woman's lot was on them.

"How short," thought I, "is the step from these gay, merry creatures to the sober, careworn matron! What destiny is in store for them? Will an early grave soon close over one of those fair young forms, and the foul worm riot on its loveliness? Or will a long life of toil and care, of joys and sorrows, be the portion of all? Their lots will be various. Who will have the tender, loving heart given her in return for her own deep, welling love? Which of them will waste away through cold neglect, and pledge her trusting love to a deceiver? Which of them will early wear the widow's sombre weeds, and weep in the dayspring of her joys over their grave? Which will in agony consign to the earth the sweetest treasures of her home, and in childless misery wend her solitary way? Who will rise a brilliant star in our literary horizon? I thought of Cora's intellectual brow and dark flashing eye. Who will be the weak devotee of fashion and folly? Kate appeared to me, with her already coquettish smile, chestnut curls, and varying hazel eye. Who will walk in the broad and wide way that leadeth to destruction? And who will meekly follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth? Should I see these fair creatures twenty years hence, even then, before life's allotted span were half told, I should not probably recognize one of them; hardly a trace of their youth and girlish beauty would be visible. God help them! God in mercy keep those sweet young creatures!" I mentally ejaculated, as my attention was attracted by two interesting figures just entering. One was an old man, very old, but still tall, erect, and muscular, his hair white and long, his eye undimmed and of a calm, holy expression, as if he already, though through a glass darkly, discerned the golden

gates of the New Jerusalem which he must shortly enter. He was led by a fair young girl, of sixteen summers I should say, in a dress of pure white, herself the picture and emblem of all that was pure and lovely.

“Gertrude will have a daguerreotype of her old grandfather, Mr. W.,” said the old man; “and, on condition that she sits with me, I have consented to have it taken. But the truth is, I can refuse her nothing.”

“Who could?” thought I, as I gazed at the modest face and beseeching eye of the gently Gertrude. And what a contrast they were, as they sat there together! Gertrude took a low seat at her grandfather’s knee—her pretty head resting on her tiny hand, her fair curls arranging themselves as they like, and they certainly did like to arrange themselves in the most picturesque style imaginable. Nothing could be more touching or striking than the contrast, or more beautiful. The fine, noble-looking old man, with his snow-white locks, broad, high brow, and heaven-searching eye, just passing away to the world unseen, ready to be offered, the time of his departure at hand, life’s toils and labors over, its wreath, its honors, its strife nothing to him, passing away. She in her almost infantine beauty, just on the threshold of life, full of hope and freshness, every thing wearing the rose-colored tint of early morning, no cloud, no care, fearing nothing, hoping all things; the one just entering the world of sense, the other the world of spirits—which was the most fearful?

But who is this walking in so daintily and so painfully in his pinched mirror-topped boots? Truly a Broadway exquisite come to have his pretty face perpetuated. Deluded puppy! Wishing to perpetuate an empty brain! Mr. W. looks quite puzzled; for he, plain man, can hardly understand the fashionable lisp.

“Mithter W., I have thopped in to avail mythelf of your renowned thkill to obtain a daguerreotype of mythelf.”

“Be seated, if you please, sir,” said Mr. W. “I m now at leisure.”

“In a moment,” replied the dandy. He went to the mirror to see if all was *comme il faut*. “Dear me!” he exclaimed, “how unbecomingly Mothemp hat arranged my hair and cut my muthtache to-day! I declare, the curl on my left temple ith cropped tho clothely that the effect is odiuth, and the therenity of my expression is entirely thpoiled by the turn of my muthtache. Indeed, I wath not aware of thethe imperfectionth when I entered; and I now pertheive that my crethent ring, which dithplays my hand more advatageouthly, ith left at home. Alath! How blind I have been! My collar ith one of lath monthth cut; and the air, being to the northeath, hath given my compexion quite a thallow tinge. Excuthe me, Mitheter W., to-day; I will prepare mythelf more becomingly and call again ath thoon ath the curl on my left temple hath obtained a becoming length, and when the wind ith at the weth; and, ath I path, I will thop and rebuke my barber for making me look tho like a shopboy. Good morning, thir;” and, drawing on his white kids, with his tortoise-shill walking stick beneath his arm, this exquisite piece of mortality and immortality left the room.

We was quite discomposed by being run over at the door by two sturdy little fellows, and a large, black, shaggy Newfoundland dog; they all came running in together.

“O Mr. W.!” exclaimed the eldest; “father says we may have Bruno’s daguerreotype taken; will you please take it?”

“If Bruno can sit still I will,” answered Mr. W.

“He can sit as still as a man; he has been practising for two months and has learned his lesson well. Ever since he pulled little sister Amy from the water, when we were in the country two months since, we promised him he should have his daguerreotype taken;

and he understands it as well as we do. Little Amy was reaching for waterlilies, one day, and slipped into the water, and would have been drowned if Bruno had not jumped in and taken her out. He drew her out very carefully and laid her on the bank, and then went to the house and tried by signs to make mother follow him. Mother was very busy, and turned him from the room several times; but he always came back and looked at her so beseechingly, and pulled her dress, and looked towards the garden, that finally mother to his great joy followed him, and found our dear little Amy all dripping with water, lying on the grass, and just recovering from her terror. Father says Bruno saved her life, and we all want his daguerreotype. Come here, sir," he said to Bruno, "and sit for your picture."

Bruno immediately obeyed, and seated himself in the most becoming attitude for his likeness; and, to the great delight of the children, Mr. W. declared he did not even once wink his large human eyes during his sitting.

"Bruno is more of a man than the Broadway exquisite, though he has four legs and is ranked among 'the beasts that perish,'" I said to myself, as I followed the little fellows and the noble animal down stairs and walked thoughtfully homewards, musing on this short but varied picture from life's drama.

[End of selected text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

An insightful study of early photography in American fiction is Susan S. Williams, *Confounding Images: Photography and Portraiture in Antebellum American Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

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