

“Sketches of Paris,” October 1843

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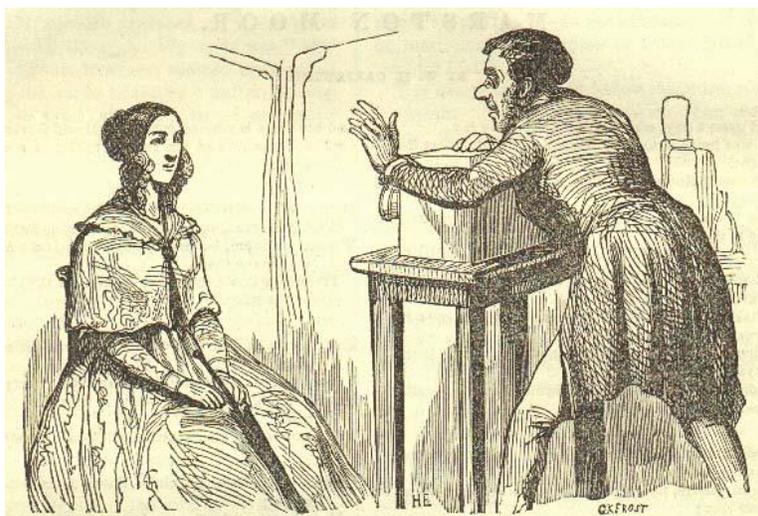
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SKETCHES OF PARIS.

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY SARAH HOWITT.

THE DAGUERRETYPE.



PARIS was the Daguerreotype’s birth-place. Here its first experiments were made; and now that it is spread all over Europe and America, this wonderful invention is carried on with all its original vigour at Paris, and seems to feel a sort of citizenship there.

It is not the Parisians alone who have their likenesses taken. All strangers who visit Paris, hasten to do likewise, before leaving the city; some, because they think every thing is better done in Paris than anywhere else; others, because they like to be able to say afterwards, “I had my Daguerreotype taken in Paris.” There are many people who will take your portrait by this new process. A card of some size, at a door, announces the Daguerreotypist, for this is the title they give to this new sort of painter. The real painter is the light which strikes on your face.

At the corner of the Boulevard Montmartre, and the Rue Richelieu, in the new house, on the Frascati ground, a card announces that there you may have a Daguerreotype portrait taken and tells you the prices besides.

For ten francs you may have a portrait of yourself as large as a miniature, and done by the sun, even when there is none. Ten francs! is it not worth while to have it. The sun is not dear. You go up stairs, you enter a room which looks like a shop without goods, but this is a shop where it is not necessary to tempt you by displaying the wares. A little enclosed space near the window, into which the aspiring subject goes, is all that is necessary.

This little enclosure is never vacant; sometimes there is a long string of people, each waiting till his turn comes.

Meanwhile, you may walk about, sit down, or even talk with the Daguerreotype people, choose the sized plate you wish, learn what numerous preparations are necessary before the sun will paint you, and what very great care is requisite during the operation; for to omit the smallest particular would destroy the success of the whole thing.

There are very queer people that come here sometimes. There you may observe a country-man and his wife, they wish to have their portraits taken to send to an old relation and they are inquiring about the price. They are told that the cheapest is ten francs.

The man, who might pass for a cattle dealer, looks at his wife, who shrugs her shoulders, saying,

“Ten francs for each of us? it is more than we are worth.—Draw us both, and take something off. Will you do us both for six francs?”

The proprietor, in reply, tells them to look at a picture near them, and begins to talk to some one else.

The countryman and his wife consult together. “It is too dear,” says the wife.—“ten francs—that will be twenty francs for us both,—there is no colour in them either,—all black,—I would rather have a painting!”

“But this is done all at once. You cannot have colours, as in a painting.”

“But look, are our faces as black as that; when we look at ourselves in the glass, don’t we see the colour of our hair, and our eyes, and our nose and our clothes?”

“But a looking-glass is not a painting.”

“And these black things—bah! let us go home;—but what is this picture?”

The rustic couple move away. A gentleman, dressed with some pretension, and wearing large hoop ear-rings, which in Paris announces a white-washer or a man with sore eyes, appears with two ladies, one of them ugly, and the other pretty. These ladies want Daguerreotype portraits of themselves, and the gentleman has been kind enough to escort them hither.

“My picture has often been taken,” says the ugly lady, “but none have been likenesses. All the painters say my expression is dreadfully hard to catch; I am curious to see what this proceeding will make of me.”

“But there can be no doubt,” says the other lady, “for it is an exact production of nature, isn’t it, Mr. Mouille?”

Mr. Mouille (the gentleman with the hoop ear-rings) shakes his head imposingly.

“Yes, it is the reproduction, that is to say—you understand—it is the reproduction.”

“It is a very extraordinary thing,” replies the ugly lady; “it is very extraordinary that your portrait should take itself by the action of the light on a plate. Is not it the effect of the light, Mr. Mouille?”

“Madame, it is the effect of daylight and optics, acted upon chemically, all combined together—it is a very fine thing”

“Were you ever taken, Mr. Mouille?”

“No, Madame, they are too black for my taste, as my complexion is very good. I am afraid I should lose by it.”

“It is very slow,” says the pretty lady to one of the proprietors, who is rubbing a plate. “Monsieur, can’t you take a portrait at once by it?”

“You need only sit fifty seconds, madame, but some time must elapse afterwards, before we can give it to you; and sometimes we fail entirely the first time.”

“Why so, monsieur?”

“Madame, there are fifty different causes why it might fail: if we use too much of one thing, or too little of another.”

“Oh, monsieur, I don’t want to know all that; but when the operation fails, what do you do then?”

“We begin again, madame,—we begin again, until the impression is perfect, we never leave it defective.”

A young man who has been waiting an hour for his turn to come, now gets up, saying,

“If that is the case, and since there are fifty causes to make the operation fail, I have had enough. I shall take my leave.”

“A true Parisian,” says the proprietor; “when you don’t play the quack with them, they have no confidence in you. This young man will go somewhere else, where they will tell him the operation never fails, and will present him a defective and ill-defined portrait. Your turn now, madame.”

The countryman and his wife, who have again appeared, address themselves to the proprietor, saying,

“Sir, will you take us two for eight francs?”

“There is no bargaining here,” is the reply.

The young lady enters the little enclosure. She is made to sit down, and lean her head against a place behind her, and fix her eyes on a point in front of her. “We are going to begin now; you will not move.”

“No, monsieur.”

“Very well, we will begin.”

The pretty lady does not move or stir, she is so extremely anxious to have a good portrait; nevertheless, a minute seems very long, and her eyes are very tired of staring at the point indicated to her. At last the operator closes the camera.

“It is finished, madame.”

“Oh let me see it.”

“Not yet, madame; if you will rejoin your companions, I will let you know directly how it has succeeded.”

The young lady returns to her companions.

“Well,” says Mr. Mouille, “how did you like it: did it hurt you?”

“How could it hurt me?”

“Does it cause any emotion?”

“A very great emotion of fatigue. Oh, how I should like to see it.”

A few minutes afterward, the operator approaches

“We have succeeded admirable, madame, your portrait is very distinct.”

“Oh, how glad I am” where is it, monsieur?”

“A few minutes more, madame; have patience.”

After waiting a quarter of an hour, the portrait is at last to be had; it is very like; but the lady sighs as she looks at it.

“How mournful it is. There is something in these portraits, which betrays that it is no mortal hand which has executed them; one would think that nature, to punish us for prying into her secrets, would injure us in revealing them.”

“It is my turn now,” says the ugly lady, “let us see if nature will do any better for me.”

At the moment when this lady enters the enclosure, the country couple appear again.

“Sir, we will put twenty-four sous more; will that do?”

The operator gives them no answer, but goes into the enclosure.

“The ugly lady tries a number of positions; she cannot decide upon any.

“Are you ready, madame?”

“Oh, monsieur, wait a moment. Am I right, so?”

“You will be right, if you will keep still.”

“Let me assume a more graceful attitude. Will this do?—no—I like this better. No, I was better before, where shall I look, sir?”

“A this little point, madame; but then you will be obliged to maintain the same smile for fifty seconds.”

“Oh, monsieur, I have preserved a smile for a whole evening, often and often. I smile so easily. At the theatre, I never do any thing else.

“Are you ready now, madame.”

“I am ready, begin!”

The operation is concluded, the operator, who is looking at his watch, does not observe that the sitter has constantly changed the expression of her face.

It is over, and the lady goes back again, and says to Mr. Mouille:

“I have an idea that it has succeeded admirably.”

After awhile, the operator announces that it has failed completely.

“We will begin again, madame.”

“It is very astonishing—the light is very capricious.”

She again places herself in the little tent, where she has the same indecision as to smiles and attitudes, sometimes she will take a rebellious air; then a tender one; then a melancholy, and, when at last one is fixed upon, the operator, upon raising his eyes, after a few seconds, discovers that she has changed the expression of her face, he calls out:

“You move madame,—you change your expression,—it will be a failure again.”

“You think so; I hardly moved at all. Merely a graceful motion of the head—a very slight one.”

“It will not do to add any thing, madame; I am very much afraid you have injured your picture.”

The lady returns to her companion; the issue is impatiently awaited.

The operator, when he appears, says,

“A failure again, madame. I was sure it would be so; you persist in moving; you shut your mouth and open it again, and show your teeth; it is impossible to obtain a representation in this manner; a fixed immovability is absolutely necessary. Look at it!”

The lady looks at a plate, where several figures interfere with each other, and no one is distinguishable.

“But there is a little of my smile, a little of my chin, and a little of my nose.”

“But it is all double. I have seen people with double chin, and even with three; but I never say any one with three noses!” adds Mr. Mouille.

“Well, monsieur, if you think it is my fault, let us try again; I will be as still as a statue.”

So she takes her seat again, as she is really very anxious to have the picture, she is prevailed upon to keep perfectly still.

When the sitting is over, they burn with impatience to know the result. The proprietor comes back with a satisfied air.

“We have succeeded perfectly, madame; you sat so still this time that the picture will be very distinct.”

“Oh! I am delighted; do let me see it.”

“In a few minutes, madame; wait a little.”

The time seems very long to the lady herself, especially as she is assured it is a good likeness.

At last the long wished for plate is brought;—they all rush to look at it. Mr. Mouille, who looks at it first, exclaims,

“Oh, it is exactly like!”

The pretty lady agrees with him; the original is very anxious to see it herself.

As soon as she casts her eyes upon it, she exclaims with a voice of horror,

“Monsieur, what are you giving me. It is a failure again—a total failure this time!”

“I assure you, madame, it is excellent.”

“I don’t know whether it has succeeded or not, but I know you are showing me a fright; you will never make me believe that that thing is my likeness. You must try it again.”

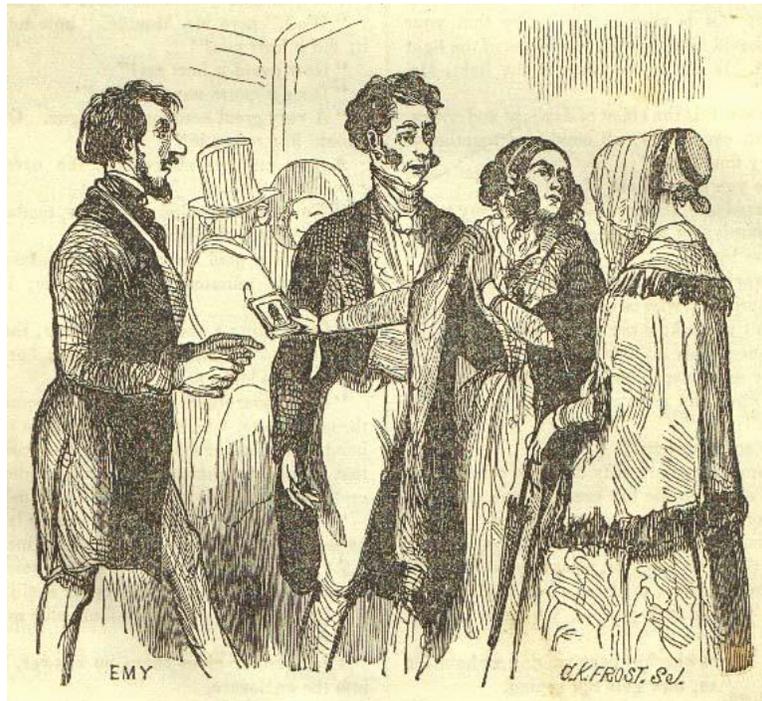
“It is of no use to attempt it again, madame; you can never have a better one.”

“You are very rude, sir. I will not take that thing.”

And this lady, who is naturally ugly, finding herself made still uglier by the mournful expression of the Daguerreotype, insists that it is a failure, and goes away without taking it.

After her, comes a gentleman, who has the tic douloureux, and twists one corner of his mouth, and who, nevertheless, is very anxious for a Daguerreotype. Another, who winks his eyes,—an old lady who shakes her head continually. And these people cannot understand that a good representation of their moving features is impossible.

In point of fact, the greater proportion of those who go away with pictures, are not satisfied; and why not? It is because the Daguerreotype does not flatter, and it is very hard to satisfy people with the plain truth.



[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

The original French-language appearance of this tale was "Le Daguerriéotype," in Paul de Kock [and others] *La Grande Ville: Nouveau Tableau de Paris*. (Paris: Au Bureau Central des Publications Nouvelles, 1842–1843): 193–204. (Also edition: [Paris: Marescq, Librairie-Editeur, 1844]: 193–204.)

The original presentation in *La Grande Ville* included two illustrations not reproduced in *Godey's*. (The illustrations are provided below.) The final illustration appears on the cover of the exhibition catalogue, Phelps Stokes, I. N. *The Hawes-Stokes Collection of American Daguerreotypes by Alberts Sands Southworth and Josiah Johnson Hawes* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1939.)

The French-language tale was again translated—appearing without illustrations—in "A Few Photographs," *Knickerbocker, or New-York Monthly Magazine* 42:2 (August 1853): 137–42. The *Knickerbocker* text was reprinted in *Photographic and Fine Art Journal* 7:4 (April 1854): 101–103.



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