

Edmund Saul Dixon, "More Work for the Ladies," 18 September 1852

(keywords: Edmund Saul Dixon, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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MORE WORK FOR THE LADIES.

HAVING given a useful hint, by the instance of the female dentist, to those of our country-women who are deficient in pocket-money to exactly the same degree in which they are overburdened with leisure, I now add a few more like examples which have fallen in our way as we moved along our road.

In all French towns where any respectable concourse or transit of strangers is going on, there, a deadly rivalry, a fierce opposition of Daguerreotypists exists. It is not the two of a trade who cannot agree, it is a good half-dozen hungry hunters after the heads of man, woman, or child, who, in defiance of their opponents, stick upon their staring collection of trophies the motto, "No connection with the Daguerreotypy over the way." It is supposed, as of course, that every tourist passing through every one of these towns must be taken; the tug of war is, who shall take him, and add the newly arrived head to the previously decapitated victims.

As I never had been done—in this way—and as it was hopeless to run the gauntlet through the horde of Daguerreotypists with the least chance of escape, I looked out for the most generous enemy to whom to surrender as prisoner, in the hope of being dealt with on the most merciful terms of portrait-painting warfare. Among the hostile chiefs was a female warrior; and I beg to hand you her card, with an assurance that she operates upon her patients with the utmost humanity:—

"Mademoiselle Lebour, Painter in Daguerreotypy, Pupil of M. Sabatier, of the Palais National at Paris, is at this time stopping at (wherever she may happen to be). If required, she Daguerreotypes ladies and gentlemen at their own houses."

I went, and was received by two ladies, one about twenty-five, the other perhaps fifty years of age. They had been doing some other people: a pretty, costumed, fish-woman, with her baby; a family party of English fold—for when you want a large dish of heads to be served, it only costs a trifle per head extra on the original plate. A middle-aged French officer had just descended from the sanctum in a pleasing state of expectancy as to how his weather-beaten face would look upon the smooth silver ground. The ladies pursued their vocation like workwomen; in and out at their dark closet, polishing the metallic panels for their portraits, handling their secret pickles, preserves, and pigments, giving a suggestion as to arrangement of dress, and chatting merrily on the gossip of the day.

They spoke no English, and some of their sitters spoke no French, which was awkward. From the table, on which specimen heads were lying, I picked up a scrap of paper, which I took for a talisman, or charm—as it was—to get over that difficulty. It was inscribed with short sentences, alternately in French and Magician's jargon. The jargon I leave unaltered, replacing the French by English; thus:—

*“Quip your ‘ed strait.
Keep your head straight.
Oui must bi gain et gain.
We must begin again.
Oh! peigne hieure haies.
Open your eyes;”*

and so forth, unintelligible as abracadabra. Then came my turn to proceed to the mysterious apartment. With a fluttering heart I took a final glance at the looking-glass, and accompanied the ladies.

“It feels very much like going to have a tooth drawn,” said I.

“You would have thought so, if you had been here the other day,” replied the elder artiste. “An English lady became quite nervous when she sat down in the chair, and as soon as it was all over, she burst into tears, and threw herself into her husband’s arms.”

“The chair does look formidable with that head-rest fixed to its back, and might be taken for a milder mode of garrotting criminals. I will venture, nevertheless. Will that do, ladies?” I asked, trying hard to assume a careless countenance and an easy attitude.

“Oh, no! Monsieur; that won’t do at all;” said the younger one, laughing. “Have the goodness to rise for one moment, and I will show you something better than that. Voila; try if you can place yourself more naturally, thus.”

I tried, and was approved of. “And now,” continued the operator, producing a piece of black silk, “look at this, and don’t be afraid. It must cover your shirt bosom for a while; then I shall come and snatch it away; but you must not budge an inch. Some Englishmen spoil their portraits, by jumping up when I have to do this.”

The elder lady took a large looking-glass to illuminate, by reflected light, my right cheek, and ear, and whisker. The awfully effective slide of the camera obscura was drawn; in a few seconds the junior stole round and whisked the black silk away; and presto! the slide was shut again, with a clap. “There!” said the senior; “your tooth is drawn, Monsieur, and I hope you have not suffered greatly.”

When I paid for my portrait, I could not help wishing that a few pale-faced, under-fed, thin-clad English girls could see how cheerfully Mademoiselle Lebour was living by the practice of Daguerreotype. She seemed almost as happy and as independent as a first-rate governess at fifty pounds a year; if such a comparison well bear the making.

[End of selected text. The article continues with a new topic. All content related to photography herein provided.]

EDITOR’S NOTES:

The author of the article is Edmund Saul Dixon (1809–93).¹ Dixon also wrote on the history and management of poultry. From 1854, he published under the pseudonym Eugene Sebastian Delamer.

The anxieties about photographic portraits is discussed in Julia F. Munro, “The Optical Stranger: Photographic Anxieties in British Periodical Literature of the 1840s and Early 1850s,” *Early Popular Visual Culture* (London) 7:2 (July 2009): 167–83.

Regarding female daguerreotypists, see also Virginia Penny, *The Employments of Women: A Cyclopaedia of Woman’s Work* (Boston: Walker, Wise, & Company, 1863): 53–55, 90–94.² For an early comment about the daguerreotype process being “particularly

fitted for a lady's recreation," see "The Daguerreotype," *Art-Union: a Monthly Journal of Fine Arts* (London) 2:23 (15 December 1840): 187–88.³

1. Anne Lohrli, *Household Words: A Weekly Journal 1850-1859* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973): 259.
2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8630001_PENNY_EMPLOY-WOMEN_1863.pdf
3. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8400015_THE-DAG_ART-UNION_1840-12-15.pdf

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