

“Justice” [psued. John H. Fitzgibbon], “The Trials of a Day; or, an Artists Troubles,” December 1854

(keywords: John H. Fitzgibbon, “Justice”, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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THE TRIALS OF A DAY; OR, AN ARTISTS TROUBLES.

Scene, a Daguerreotypists’ Gallery.

Enter Proprietor: Good morning, William.

Assistant. Good morning, sir; we are likely to have a fine day, by every appearance.

Pro. Yes, and a busy one, too, I hope; for, by-the-by I have a note to pay to-morrow, and am short about one hundred dollars.

Assist. Well, you know we have had such wretched bad weather lately, that nobody could turn out, if they wanted pictures ever so bad.

Pro. Yes, ’tis my luck; misfortune never comes alone. I thought after what happened last week, the tide would turn in my favor; but it still seems to run stronger and stronger against me. Well, there is no use, as they say, to cry over spilt milk. Ha! Go see what the boy wants.

Boy below, speaking through the trumpet. A gentleman wants a half-size picture, sir.

Assist. Send him up, we will have the plate ready in a few minutes.

Pro. Well, William, that is a pretty good beginning. Make haste buff quick—I hear some one else entering the reception rooms; they may crowd us to-day.

Assist. Plate ready, sir.

Scene changes to sky-light room. Enter gentleman with a good countenance.

Proprietor knows he is not hard to please,

Pro. Take a seat, sir: in this chair, if you please. Have you ever sat for your likeness?

Gent. Yes, twice; but I cannot say that I was pleased with them. It seems to me that the person who took them did not understand his business.

Pro. Were they taken in the city, sir?

Gent. No; in our little country town; the man appeared to have as much as he could do, but yet his pictures had not that clearness I see in yours.

Pro. That is not an uncommon thing, sir, to see traveling operators getting out bad specimens of our art—turn your head a little to the left, sir—that will do.

Gent. How long shall I have to sit?

Pro. Only twenty seconds.

Gent. Is that all? Why, when I sat before, I was nearly two minutes.

Pro. That is often the case; some operatives detain their sitters that length of time. Now then, sir, you will be pleased to keep your eye on that object—you must not imagine that

you are sitting for a picture, feel that you are only in a familiar conversation with me, and should you wish to wink during the operation, you can do so, as it will not be any detriment to the picture, but in fact serves it, because it gives relief to the eye, and often prevents that unpleasant stare which is so common in daguerreotypes.

Gent. Why, I was told not to wink, or the picture would be spoiled—that must be quite an improvement.

Pro. Yes, sir, to the eye—that will do.

Gent. What! Taken already? Why, I was not aware that you had commenced.

Pro. That was what I most desired, and I have no doubt but we have an excellent picture of you.

Gent. How long before I can see it?

Pro. In three minutes, sir, I can tell whether it is good or bad; if not good I will try again. I never show my pictures with the chemicals on them, as it detracts from their beauty by an exposure to a strong light before they are finished.

Gent. Well, you are the artist; I shall leave it to you. I only want a good picture. If it is not good you suffer in reputation, and not I.

Pro. All right, sir, leave it to me and you are sure to get a good picture.

Boy, down stairs. Get three medium plates ready.

Pro. Send them up—ready in a few minutes.

Enter mother and daughter and a young gentleman.

Gent. Now, Mr. Artist, I want you to try you best; I wish those two ladies taken on separate plates, and myself on another. But, hark ye, I don't want these dark looking pictures that I see specimens of in your gallery below stairs.

Pro. Well, sir, what kind do you wish to have?

Gent. I want pictures without those confounded dark marks under the eyes and nose, with a black streak across the mouth, and deep shadow under the chin and on the neck.

Pro. I understand you, sir; like Queen Elizabeth, you wish your portrait to have no shadows at all. You want something that is fair, clear and smooth, without anything to mark the outlines of the features—you don't like shade about a picture.

Gent. Yes, yes! Exactly so—exactly so.

Pro. Well, sir, to get good pictures of the ladies and yourself, I must have those very marks you are so much opposed to, as it is impossible to produce good pictures without them. I might, to be sure, get a something, but then I would be ashamed of it, and would never think of stamping my name upon it as emanating from this establishment.

Gent. Well, any how, don't put them on strong.

Pro. Sir! I shall not put them on at all; nature does that, not I. Will one of you be pleased to take a seat. I might talk all day on the subject of lights and shadows without making you a convert to its doctrine, as I perceive you are hard to convince. I see that, sir.

Young Lady. I feel so stiff and awkward with this prong behind my head. Oh! For mercy's sake, take it away, it makes me think I am at the dentist's again having my teeth operated on.

Mother. Hush, my daughter, Mr. T. will believe you have false teeth if he should hear you, and then you know you might produce a bad impression.

Pro. Please to keep still, Miss; you will greatly oblige me if you will not move your hands any more.

Young Lady. La, me! You will give me such large hands if I keep them there. I wish to

put them in front, so that they will show pretty.

Mother. Yes, my child, you have a very pretty, small hand, and it should be placed so as to show off to the best advantage.

Pro. to mother and gentleman. Will you please step a little on this side, as I cannot well take the young lady while you are there—that will do. Now, if you please, don't talk or move about for a few seconds.

Mother. Recollect child, what I told you—look smiling, as you can when you will.

Pro. Now then, ready; when I take the cover off the front of the instrument. Keep still, I will only detain you fifteen seconds. * * That will do.

Young Lady I don't think it is good; I know I shant like it.

Pro. Why not, miss?

Young Lady. Because I forgot to smile until ma told me, and then you stop'd it off.

Pro. So much the better, miss; we shall be sure to get a natural expression, instead of one put on for the occasion, will *you* take a seat, madam?

Mother. In a few minutes, sir, as soon as I arrange my cap. I want you to be particular and not show those grey hairs as plain as they appear: they are not natural to me, they are only a little—a very little grey—I don't want to look older than I am, or older than I feel, at any rate.

Pro. I will do my best, Madam, to oblige you, but I am fearful that I shall have to show them, otherwise the picture will not look like you.

(The old lady was on the near side of fifty, and as grey as a badger).

Mother. Must I look one way all the time.

Pro. If you please, madam; should you change the position of the eyes, you might look cross-eyed in the picture.

Mother. Goodness, gracious! I won't be taken if you are going to make me cross-eyed, for I am sure my eyes are very straight and good.

Pro. Elevate your glasses a little, madam; that will do. Now all is ready.

Mother. Wait a bit, Mr. Artist; have'nt you a book? I wish to hold one in my hand, I always thought it gave character to a picture, and left an impression on the spectator's mind of the type of the original.

Pro. Yes madam, and I believe so too; but if you do not keep still, I will not be able to get an impression of a daguerreotype, that's certain.

After a few more questions, I managed to catch the old lady. Next came the nice young man, and of him I made short work, telling him as he had heard the instructions I had given the ladies, I hoped he had profited by them, and would keep quiet for a few seconds, as there were several others below waiting for their pictures by this time. So, after smoothing down his locks, straightening up his shirt collar, and arranging his toilet in the most knowing manner, said he was ready. The only particular instructions he gave me was, that I would be sure to make a little—almost imperceptible sandy colored imperial show distinctly on his almost beardless chin; also his watch chain and finger rings, and be very careful about the black streak across his mouth.

I soon found out that I had to sit the young lady again, as she had four hands instead of two, caused by her great anxiety to show them off to the best advantage. At last, by getting them a shade lighter, I managed to produce a picture that pleased all parties, my own judgment to the contrary notwithstanding.

Next came a lady and child for a quarter-sized plate. These are the pictures which give the artist the most trouble and tries his patience sorely. But still we find many ladies who are ready to make allowances for the difficulties under which we labor in taking the

children's pictures, and are content to get a good likeness without a position, or at least with such a one as would become a grown person much better than a child, and one not too fastidious about exposing the little one's legs, or having the dress disarranged, and this was one of those ladies. After arranging the couple as well as I could, for the little fellow was very restless, I set him on a pillar by his mamma, and commenced the old story about the little bird that was going to hop out after he had eaten his breakfast; that he had blue wings and such a pretty white tail; but all my blarney had no effect, the arch young thing seemed to want to come forward and get him before he should come out. Then I tried another way of coaxing him with a bell, and rung so hard that I almost electrified him, for he leaned against his mother, raised on of his little legs, and kept remarkably still until the conclusion, consequently I got a good picture: but his ma did not seem to be pleased with his independent attitude, but it tickled his grandfather, who was present, mightily, and he declared he would not take one hundred dollars for the picture, it was so natural; yet still, to please the lady, I had to try it over again, but I could not obtain another to satisfy myself as did the first.

Next I had a double-quarter picture of a boy and girl to take; they stood remarkably still, the parents were well pleased, and so was I, that I had gotten through so far without much bother. But I was exulting too soon, for while I was finishing the above, in came a lady and her sister, with two children. She informed me she had tried no less than seven times to get one of them taken at another gallery, but the expression was wanting. I told her that I feared I should not be more fortunate, (for really the child lacked animation in its countenance and was cross-eyed in the bargain.) I would try, however and do my best, in the mean time I gave orders to William to coat me six medium plates. In a few moments I told the lady I was ready; then she wished for a comb and a little water to fix up the dear little things hair.

Boy, down stairs, halloing up through the trumpet. A gentleman and lady wishes to see you, sir, about taking four pictures. I immediately answered through the same instrument, to tell the lady and gentleman that I would be down in a few minutes. Then turning to the lady beside me said, will you be pleased, madam, to let me sit the little girl now.

Lady. I don't want her taken in a sitting posture, I wish to have her standing up.

Pro. I fear, madam, that that is impossible, as the child seems not to understand what we require of her.

Lady. Oh! Her pa would not like it sitting.

Pro. Well, madam, I will try to gratify you.

Lady. Now, my dear, don't look that way; look this way and laugh. Now can't you, that's a dear, and I will buy you that china doll I promised.

Pro. If you will please step to one side, madam, I think I can talk to her for a few seconds.

Little Girl. Ma, I don't want that doll with the cap on .

And away she goes from where I had for the last five minutes been placing her.

Mother. My dear, go back and do as the gentleman tells you.

Child. I don't want to, I want that doll.

Mother. Well, my dear, you shall have it if you go stand there a little while.

So by coaxing and mock smiling, I managed to get her back to the starting point.

Boy, below stairs, halloing up. Lady and child on a medium plate, right away.

Pro. Tell them I will be ready in a few minutes. Then turning to the child, I said, now then, when I count five you watch for the doll to come out of the box all dressed, but without the cap, and the child began to look cross-eyed, with her moth wide open, so I

found that that would not do, and had to try some other plan to beguile her. Ha! Says I, look yonder, don't you see that old grey goose a smiling at the gander. Unfortunately at this time, an old couple had come in to sit for their pictures, and the old man looked daggers at me, as much as to say, pray sir, did you mean that I am a gander.

I found when the picture was removed from the Mercury, that the expression would certainly not do, and the little one had let her head fall during the time she was before the camera, and consequently blurred it; so I went at it again, but with no better success. At last I told the lady if she wished me to get a picture, that she must let the child sit down. No, she did not want it sitting. She had seen one of Mrs. M.'s children that was taken standing, and it looked beautiful.

Pro. The child or the picture, madam?

Lady. Why, the child, to be sure.

Pro. Well, madam, you see it is impossible for me to take your child in a standing posture, for it will let its head droop in spite of all my coaxing and your persuasion. —I had tried a dozen different ways, and promised it a dozen different things, but all to no purpose; it would pout and hold down its head in spite of all I could do. At last I told the lady I would try no more, unless she would permit me to take it sitting, for by this time there were five or six others in waiting. She at length reluctantly consented, and I was so fortunate as to get a good picture after two trials.

Boy, down stairs. Lady says she can't wait any longer.

Pro. I am coming down immediately.

So, after giving directions to my assistant to keep on buffing medium plates, down I goes, and there another scene presented itself.

Lady with the child. Can't you sit me next.

Pro. Did you come first, madam?

Lady. No, but I have been waiting a long time, and my little girl is getting restless.

Pro. I am very sorry, madam, to keep you waiting, but I must wait on this lady and gentleman first, as they were here before you. And then again, madam, I am afraid I should have some trouble to get your little one, as I have a hard time of it just now with two little children up stairs. If you can wait a short time, I will sit you as it will be your turn after I get through with those who are now with me.

Lady. Mr. I can't wait; I will go somewhere else and try if I can find a gentleman who is more accommodating to ladies.

Pro. Surely, madam, you cannot blame me. If I wait on you first the others will be offended, and again I have another little one up stairs. I hear them now enquiring for me.

Lady. It makes no difference, sir, I will never patronize your establishment again. And away she flirted out of the room.

Gent. Well, that is a strange lady, to be sure. I should not like to be a daguerreotypist if she is a sample of your customers. What say you, my dear?—turning to the lady he was with.

Lady. Oh, you know that I told you that there were few of our sex who can keep their tempers in all things.

Gent. Well, sir, let us see if you and I can't get along.

Pro. I will answer for that beforehand, sir.

Gent. Why so?

Pro. Because I am a physiognomist as well as a daguerreotypist; my daily intercourse with the world, as well as my business, which throws me in contact with so many different characters, has taught me to scan the human character, and I seldom fail to read

the mind, especially as relates to my business with it.

Gent. Well, sir, I want four pictures taken. What do you charge for two of this size?

Pro. Those sir, are eight dollars.

Gent. What is this size?

Pro. Three dollars, sir.

Gent. I will take these two at eight dollars, and those two at three dollars, and before I go any further let me settle for them. Immediately he pulled out his port-monie and handed me twenty-two dollars. I told him the plates would be ready immediately and I would call him up stairs in a few minutes. So away I went to the sky-light room, and had hardly entered it before the old lady and gentleman commenced on me by saying that they wanted their *dogerotypes* right away, as they lived twenty-two miles from town and must start soon for home; that their son Joseph was about to start for *Californy* to make his fortune, and as how he wanted to old folks' pictures to take along with him.

Pro. Patience, patience; I will wait on you very soon now. Madam, will you please set that child here on this chair—there that will do. Now then my pretty little dear, hold still a moment. Ha! Look here; oh! Look here; see this pretty, curly little black and white dog, with his tail curled down—here he comes—that will do. I know that this is good for the child never moved.

While that was being brought out I gave the old folks a sitting. Now says the old man don't make the old lady look too old, and as for mine, why spread yourself on it and make me look like one of those *big pictures* I see down stairs. I promised to do my best for them if they would only keep still. So the old man threw himself back in the chair, crossed his legs and told me to go ahead. I remarked to him that he must not throw himself quite so far back, and to turn a little to the lady. "Mr." says the old man, "that won't do. I can't be fixed up that way; you must take me natural like, just as I always be." I told him I would endeavor to do so, but still I thought if he would not spread himself quite so much, we would get a much more natural picture of him. "Well, anyhow," say the old man, "go a-head steamboat. Now I am ready, sir. Hold on, hold on; old woman, give us your pocket handkercher. Now then, take us of how long shall we have to be fixed up here?" I told him only a few seconds; that it would have been done before this if he had only kept still. So, after sitting them about twenty seconds, I said it was all over. I got a very good picture. The old man thought he was rather too black in the face. No, no, said I, it is your complexion that has caused it, (he was dark skinned and very much sun-burnt). The old lady vowed she had known him just forty-seven years and four months last twenty-fifth of May, and she would not ha' known it was he. All I could do I could not persuade them to take it. I told them in order to prove what I said, that I would sit them again, and would ensure them to come out just the same as at first. The old man swore if it did that there was some magic in it. He liked the old woman's first-rate, he said, but his he could not swallow, no way you could fix it. So for once in my life I tried to get two pictures alike, and succeeded, for they looked like two black peas. The old man gave in, and began to think with the old woman, that they were not quite so unlike each other after all, and concluded to take the both.

Boy, down stairs. Lady and little boy on a medium plate.

Pro. Will be ready soon; send up lady and gentleman. Now, sir, I will wait on you and the lady. I am sorry to have kept you so long, but so it is. It is hard to make my calculations as to the time occupied by persons who sit for their pictures, and we find it still harder to please them; even after advancing in the art, the less it seems to me, the community appreciate good pictures.

Gent. So I should judge by the unnecessary trouble which people give you. I take it for granted that when I come to your gallery, that you understand your business, and accordingly leave every thing to you. As a matter of course it is to your interest to endeavor to produce the best possible picture for me.

Pro. Ah! How few like you, sir. We are hardly allowed to say one word at times, whether the picture is good or bad, especially if we get a fine one the first time. To some persons it cannot be as good, as Mr. So-and-so—some miserable pretender to the art—set them five or six times, and then gave them a choice. Will the lady take a seat first?

Lady. Yes, I am ready. As I intended to let you have your own way in arranging the position, I will endeavor to have the proper expression, so that you will not be so much troubled with us as with others.

Pro. I don't think I will have much trouble, madam.

So I sat four impression of her right off. She seemed very anxious to know if the first was not right. I told here that they were not yet brought out by the mercury, and as I had the plates ready, I thought I would make sure, and let her have her choice. Fortunately three of them came out good. I then sat the gentleman, and had no trouble with him. After I got through, he asked me when I would have them done. I replied that I would endeavor to have them ready this evening or in the morning. He told me to take my time, and finish them in my best style. This I promised to do. He then wanted to know what he had to pay. I told him nothing, as he had already paid me below stairs. Ah! says he, that was only for the cases. No sir, I replied, it was for pictures and all complete.

Gent. But I did not understand it so.

Pro. That makes no sort of difference, sir; it would not be just in me to take advantage of your not understanding me on that head. I charged you my regular prices, sir; you paid me willingly, and I have endeavored to give you good pictures.

Gent. But then, my dear sir, you took a good deal of trouble and sat us four times each.

Pro. You were not half as much trouble, sir, as some customers I have had to-day.

Gent. Well, well, here I insist upon your taking this ten dollar bill for your kindness, and finish them up well.

I took it, but gave him better cases than he bargained for, and thought in my own mind that here was one of *Nature's Noblemen*. How few such are to be found now-a-days. The gentleman was a perfect stranger to me. I had never seen him before, and was determined to find out who he was; so, shortly afterwards a friend of mine came in, to whom I showed the picture. Why, says he, that is Mr. A. V. one of our best and most valuable citizens; so I concluded that if ever I should be in a tight place, Mr. A. V. would be the very man whom I should not be ashamed to ask to help me.

The next who came up was an uncouth specimen of a *lady* from the Emerald Isle, with her son, John Hughes, as she called him. So Mrs. Hughes and master Johny took a seat, and Johny began to kick and bellow, and his lady mother says, Arrah, Johny, be quiet, till the gentleman takes your pictur, me darlint. I will buy you some candy and a gun, Johny, if you'll be afther keepin' quiet only for a few minutes. But the more she tried to keep Johny quiet, the more he kicked and bellowed. At last I told here to hold him up close to her, and I would make an effort. I found however, that coaxing would not do; so I began to scold, and that kept him quiet for a few seconds—lying during this time in such a position as cannot be well described. But the face was first-rate. After it was finished, I brought it out, and showed it to the mother. Och! And sure, that was not her Johny Hughes, at all, at all. Arrah, musher! And where is his feet? And now don't you see he has only got one hand, and the buttons on his clothes don't show at all; and she did'nt

want rich a pictur as that—that the face was good, which was more than I expected, and taking everything into consideration, it was more than I could hope for. But she would not have it at all, no how. Take us again, said she. I would rather be excused says I; that is as good as I can possibly get, so it would be useless for me to try again. Och, Johny Hughes, but you're a bad boy. And up she takes her child, after giving me half an hour of as severe a trial as I ever had in the whole course of my practice, and that without even getting thanks for my trouble. I thought of the remark of Hamlet, "look upon this picture and upon that," in the great difference between these and my last visitors.

Boy, below stairs. Get half plate ready for a group.

And up come a whole family of Germans. It took me some time before I could understand what kind of a picture they wanted. At last I thought I did, and set to work accordingly. I hardly ever sat a group that had such a diversity of colors in their complexions, and I knew it would be a hard matter to please the party. After several attempts, I got one that I thought would pass, but still, lo and behold! They would not be satisfied till they saw it. The Dutchman put his finger on his vrow's face and eyes, and says, *dat ish goot*. I almost got out of patience, and told him that he had spoiled the picture. Vell, says he, *dry agin*. Yes, says I, but I don't like all this trouble for nothing. Oh! I'se pay you, says minheer, and after one more sitting I got all right. So after finishing it up and handing it to him, he fumbled in his pocket for some time and pulled out a silver dollar, and gave it to me. I asked him what that was for, when he said, "for de picture." I told him that would not do, that the price was twelve dollars. "Nix," says he, "ones dollar; de poy told me for de heads, one dollar." "Yes," says I, "one dollar for every extra head on the same plate." "Oh, nix, nix, I no go twelve dollar. I will give you one dollar and half." "no, no, it makes no difference, you need not take it there are other waiting for the pictures, whom I hope will not give me so much trouble for nothing." And out goes the Dutchman and his troupe, muttering to himself, "nix, tonder and plixen, to fiel helt."

The next sitters were a little boy and young lady with their mamma. She wanted them fixed her own way, and regretted very much that she had not a cloak to put on the boy, for, says she, "I admire drapery so much." "But, madam," said I, "the child is too young for a cloak, and I don't think it would become him." "Well, will you give my daughter a stool to rest her foot on, it makes a person sit so much easier, I think." "Well madam, just as you like, but I think not. It might become you, but not a young lady." "Oh, I see, sir; you are determined to have your own way, and I suppose I must say no more about it." "No, madam, you are mistaken, I only tell you what I think best according to my experience. Individually it is a matter of no consideration to me how a person sits, but as an artist, I have my opinion as to what is most proper and becoming in position and style." Thus was I allowed to have my own way, and after two sittings got a very fine picture, which pleased the old lady very much indeed. And now I hoped there would be no more calls on me for this day, as it had been already one of trials, vexations, and troubles enough, without any additional ones to break me down. So I went to work to finish up what I had taken and were yet uncalled for. I thought that night as I lay on my couch perfectly tired out, how few there were who have their pictures taken who are aware of the unnecessary trouble and trials they put a daguerreotypist to every day, in the indulgence of their whims and caprices, and I hope and trust should this paper ever be read by any one who desires his or her daguerreotype taken, that they will at least allow the artist to judge of such things as he has studied and is conversant with without attempting to dictate to him, when they are totally ignorant of a single particle of either

art or science. How often do we find it the case that persons take the very worst picture, and leave the best behind, when if they would have sense enough to submit to the judgment of the artist, they would be richer in the way of pictures. And now, reader, if you are not an artist, take a hint, and remember the trials of

JUSTICE.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

A later biographical profile of John H. Fitzgibbon informs us of his use of the pseudonym, "Justice." See "J. H. Fitzgibbon, of St. Louis, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York) 4:92 (5 September 1857): 213.¹

The daguerreotypist N. G. Burgess relates similar anecdotes in N. G. Burgess, "Amusing Incidents in the Life of a Daguerrean Artist," *Photographic and Fine Art Journal* (New York) 8:6 (June 1855): 190.² For a similar fictional tale—and less verbose—see Paul de Kock, "Sketches of Paris," *Godey's Lady's Book* vol. 27 (October 1843): 176–78.³ See also the sentimental/moral tale, Sarah Roberts, "An Hour in a Daguerreian Gallery," in *The Amaranth; or, Token of Remembrance. A Christmas and New Year's Gift for 1855*. Emily Percival, edit. (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1855): 211–25.⁴

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8570002_FITZGIBBON_BIO_LESLIES_1857-09-05.pdf
2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8550002_BURGESS_PFAJ_1855-06.pdf
3. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8430004_SKETCHES_GODEYS_1843-10.pdf
4. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8550001_ROBERTS_AN_HOUR_AMARANTH_1855.pdf

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