

**Nathan G. Burgess, "Amusing Incidents in the Life of a Daguerrean Artist,"
June 1855**

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AMUSING INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A DAGUERREAN ARTIST.

BY N. G. BURGESS.

The experience of all those who follow the Daguerrean Art, as a profession, will show many amusing and laughable incidents which have been noted down from time to time. For the benefit of the readers of the Journal I will transcribe a few, which may amuse at least if not instruct them.

Persons who sat for pictures, in the early stage of the Art, were of course ignorant of the *modus operandi*, and they not unfrequently moved during the sitting, although the Artist may have given full directions to the contrary.

An elderly lady was once seated in front of the camera, and was informed that for two minutes she must be in a perfectly passive mood and watch the glasses of the camera. On returning to the camera, the Artist was surprised to find her standing by the window viewing the passers-by in Broadway. She remarked that while she was waiting for the picture to come out of the box, she thought, there would be no harm in looking out of the window, as she expected her son to call for her about that time and she was wondering why he did not come.

Another Artist, was called upon to take the likeness of a lady dressed in deep mourning, who when seated in the chair, and the focus of the camera drawn accurately upon the ground glass, and just as he was about to place the plate-holder in the Box, she called upon him to wait a moment, for her to request him to represent her in the picture, as holding in her lap a dear little child whom she had but a few days before laid in the cold grave.

But a most amusing and laughable anecdote is related of an Artist who was called upon by a volunteer in the late Mexican War. He was just starting for the battle-fields of glory, when, he bethought himself of his Daguerreotype, that he would leave with his lady-love. He had imprudently, imbibed too much of those strong drinks repudiated by the Prohibitory Law, and the day being rather cloudy, it required at least three or four minutes sitting. When the time expired, our hero the volunteer, was found to be a sleeper at his post. The Artist however did not disturb him, but quietly removing the plate, he proceeded to bring it out over the mercury bath, when it was found to be very dark, and withal, rather sleepy in appearance: The light was not sufficiently strong for another

picture, and it was finished, and the sleeper awakened to receive his image on silver which was deemed rather dark and misty. But the Artist assured him, when the weather became clear and his head also the picture would assume a clearness not then discernable, which fully satisfied the soldier, and he departed for Mexico.

A traveling artist was quite amused by a call from a young man in a country town, late in the afternoon, just as the sun was sinking behind the western hills; when it was too late to produce any impression on the plate. The young man was rather verdant; nor had he seen the wonderful process of Daguerre, much less any paraphernalia of a Daguerrean artist. He was very anxious to obtain his portrait that very evening, as he was just starting for the west. The Artist assured him it was too late to produce a good one, as his labors ceased at dusk. But the youth was incredulous, and insisted on his likeness being then taken. He would be satisfied with anything, if not so good a likeness. The Artist was reluctant to comply, but he bethought himself of some old specimens in his plate-box, that might answer for a likeness and he requested the young man to be seated, in front of the camera, when he drew the focus and required him to remain still until he returned which would be at least five or ten minutes. He repaired to his plate box, and found a picture that bore the only resemblance to the young man, in the fact that it was taken for another young man in the city of New York. The likeness was sealed up and put into a case—and then carefully laid in the Camera-box—when five minutes had expired the artist, withdrew the picture from the box, and immediately opened it to the astonished gaze of the sitter. There were several of the artists friends and acquaintances in the room during the occurrence, all anxiously watching the scene, and of course highly amused at the wonder expressed by the subject of the levity. He was quite surprised to learn that he made so good a likeness, and still more so that the artist had given him such a fine suit of clothes; remarking that the coat had more buttons than his, and in fact was a very much better picture than he thought he would make. The artist very complacently informed him that he knew it would please him the more to show his likeness in an improved dress and he accordingly added a few more buttons, and withal put on an entire new suite throughout as he sadly needed one. The youth was much obliged to him, he took the picture and paid his dollar and left for the west. It may be questioned here whether the conduct of the Artist, on this occasion was strictly correct. But many pictures are delivered daily that do not bear so strong a likeness to the one intended, as this one in question, being executed by those who have no skill or knowledge of any of the rules of Art.

An instance of forgetfulness was mentioned as occurring many years ago, when it required five or ten minutes sitting. A sitter was requested to await the return of the artist who thoughtlessly went to his dinner, and actually forgot that he had a sitter in his chair. When at least half an hour had expired the sitter's patience became exhausted, he left the seat, and sought in vain, for the Artist and it was several minutes before he returned when he humbly demanded pardon, for his forgetfulness, and proceeded to take another, which he presented him gratis; for his long forbearance and forgiving disposition.

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