

## 34 Five minutes in a photographic caravan

*Anon.*

Source: Anon. (1886) 'Five minutes in a photographic caravan', *Photographic News*, vol.30, no.1434, 26 February, pp.133-4.

It was in quite a weak moment I allowed myself to enter that caravan. I did not want my portrait taken – indeed, I hate the operation – besides, the hour was late; five minutes to eleven, p.m. But the inducement held out by the artist that he would give me three photographs complete for a shilling before the hour struck, fascinated me. And by the electric light, too! The desire to witness this astonishing advance in photographic science could not be resisted. So I ascended the wooden steps of the caravan.

It was not a palatial interior, either in size or aspect. In area about six feet by four, with walls of a neutral tint, and a form arranged on one side, it looked like a third-class carriage on the South Eastern Railway, about as comfortless an apartment as there is in the world. There was a door at one corner which I involuntarily made for, imagining it led into the studio. I was stopped by a lady in seedy black and of crushed aspect, who said nothing, but, seizing the handle, waved me off. I presume it led to the artist's domestic quarters, and hastily retiring beneath the lady's gaze, I believe I should have retreated altogether, had not the artist popped his head from behind a curtain, and announced that he was 'ready for the next gent.'

I now became aware that the 'studio' was at the other end of the caravan, and, in fact, projected into the 'reception room,' the size of which was cramped in consequence. The curtain formed at once the entrance to the studio and the dark room, the latter a compartment about the size of a sentry box.

The studio was certainly not more than five feet by three. It was painted of a light blue, and in the left-hand corner, fronting the sitter, was a sort of glass cupboard, placed diagonally. The glass was blue, and its use I was presently to see. The studio was wholly devoid of 'properties'; its solitary article of furniture was a common Windsor chair, behind which was a well-worn head-rest.

'Sit down,' said the artist, briefly, 'and look *there*.' And he dabbed his forefinger on a dirty mark on the light blue wall, which dirty mark was the result of frequent dabs from the aforesaid forefinger. The head-rest was applied in half-a-second, and in a second more the artist had his head beneath the focussing cloth, and a camera with four lenses was protruded towards my face. That my eyes were fixed on the dirty mark amply satisfied the artist. He did not trouble himself as to whether the head was inclined towards the left shoulder or the right. When I enquired whether I had better not take my hat off, he said I could do as I liked; he was profoundly indifferent as to my expression, and never demanded that I should look pleasant.

All he said was: 'Now don't be afraid, it won't hurt you,' and up blazed an intense light in the blue-glass cupboard. I must confess that the sensation of the blinding blaze was not pleasant. The exposure was probably five or six seconds. I blinked and bleared at the dirty dab with a sort of feeling that it was photographing itself on my brain. The artist did not use the

usual formula of 'Thank you,' but simply handed the dark-slide to a mysterious assistant whom I could just discern in the gloom, and whose movements, coupled with a bumping sound, were strongly suggestive of a wooden leg, and hurried away to the reception room.

Two giggling young ladies with a couple of swains of the true 'Arry' style had entered, and as they were inclined to be frolicsome, the artist was stern and uncompromising in his demeanour.

'I'm just going to close,' said he, 'so you'd better make up your minds.'

But this, clearly, was what they couldn't do. The ladies had seated themselves on the gentlemen's laps, and while one expressed a desire to be 'took' standing on her 'ead,' the other suggested that a 'pot of four-arf' should be sent for. Then there was a little chaff, and finally the four trooped down the steps again, the gentlemen playfully bonneting the young ladies as they went. The artist came back somewhat ruffled and exasperated.

'There! that's what we got to put up with. Wanted to be took at fourpence a-piece. I could not do less than three for a shilling, and told 'em so, and then they said they'd go and have some supper instead. Supper! A bit o'fried fish, I s'pose, is about their supper.'

I expressed my sympathy, and, to distract his thoughts, made some enquiry about the electric light he used, mildly hinting that it might be magnesium wire.

'Yes, it is,' said he, half suspiciously and half defiantly. 'Are you a-going into the business?'

I hastened to assure him that nothing could be further from my intention.

'Oh, then, take my advice, and don't. No, it ain't magnesium wire,' he added immediately after, with an air as though he were relenting towards me; 'it's the Luxorygraph powder. There ain't no patent in it. Anybody can use it.'

I was about to assure him that I had no intention of investing in 'Luxorygraph powder,' when out came the wooden-legged assistant with the portraits – four on a ferrotype plate. Yes, there I was, though I did not recognise myself. The corners of my eyes had disappeared, my cheeks had merged into my forehead, the dimple in my chin was gone, and not a wrinkle could be seen anywhere. I gasped out. 'Oh, yes very good,' upon which the lady in black proceeded to dry and varnish, which she did with the aid of a gas burner.

Then she snipped the plate into four, and handed the pieces to the artist, who again took up the running.

'You'll want mounts,' said he. 'They're a penny a-piece. The four portraits and the four mounts for eighteen pence. That won't hurt you.'

And he held up before my presumably admiring eyes one of the ferrotypes behind the oval opening of a card mount. I was conquered, and handed over the required sum to the lady.

The labour was thus beautifully and systematically divided, and I remarked that they must be able to turn out a good many in the day.

'Oh, we can do it when we get the chance.'

Our friend's manner was so suspiciously aggressive that I hesitated to ask him many questions. Could he have thought I wanted to start in opposition?

If I had, I should have learnt something in the way of promptitude and dispatch, for as I went down the steps of the caravan the hour of eleven sounded. The artist had kept his word.