

Souls on a Plate

A mad photographer kills his sitters in order to picture their departing souls: *The Camera Fiend*, 1911, by E. W. Hornung

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In 1911 a photographic journalist declared that "Photography is becoming too sensational for the liking of quiet minds." (1) The event which prompted this remark was the publication of a strange novel, "The latest clever exploit in hair-raising fiction," by a popular turn-of-the-century author, Ernest William Hornung 1866-1921.

Although Hornung wrote over 30 books, his name has been largely forgotten in the annals of popular fiction. This is understandable. His novels could never be considered great literature. They are urbane, witty, well-crafted but not very profound. Yet they give the impression that the author was capable of brilliance if only he could have tackled more profound issues with concentrated determination. One critic remarked: "He had, indeed, talents. . . which. . . might, had he bothered, have been made the vehicle of great ideas. But he did not bother." (2) That seems, from the evidence of his books, a fair comment - Hornung was too naturally clever.

If Hornung's books are not destined to be enshrined in a literary hall of fame, one of them deserves to be remembered by photographers. *The Camera Fiend*, written in 1911, is a strange tale about a crazy photographer/scientist and a young snapshot enthusiast whom he befriends.

They meet early one morning in London's Hyde Park. The hero, an asthmatic youth named Pocket, is found sleepwalking with a pistol in his hand while nearby is the body of a tramp, a "dilapidated creature lying prone," who had been shot moments earlier. It looks bad for young Pocket.

He is approached by an odd looking man who "stood tall and dominant, with a silver stubble on an iron jaw, and a weird cloak and hat that helped to invest him with the goblin dignity of a Spanish inquisitor; no wonder his eyes were like cold steel in quivering flesh . . ." (3) This is Dr. Otto Baumgartner, who had attended various universities studying psychology and theology until becoming obsessed with proving the

existence of the human soul.

Baumgartner disarms and wakes up young Pocket who later notices a stereoscopic camera beneath the Doctor's cloak. They discover a mutual interest in photography and, back at Baumgartner's home, they discuss the pleasures of the camera. Quickly, however, it is established that they have different aims. The doctor asks:

"You take portraits of your friends, perhaps?"

"Yes; often. "

"In the body, I presume?"

Pocket looked nonplussed.

"You only take them in the flesh?"

"Of course. "

"Exactly! I take the spirit," said the doctor; "that's the difference. "

Baumgartner's motive is revealed; he is a psychic photographer obsessed with capturing the human soul in a picture: "I hold that a man's soul may be caught apart, may be cut off from his body by no other medium than a good sound lens in a light-tight camera. "

His ambition is "to intercept the actual flight of the soul" by photographing it at the moment of the body's death. It is now evident that Pocket was not a murderer but merely an innocent, who had inadvertently disturbed the mad scientist in the act of a psychic experiment, and who was now being held hostage.

Pocket's family has hired a gentlemen-detective to search for the missing boy and the tale gradually unwinds until he is eventually found. The ending is not such a happy one for Dr. Baumgartner, but it is his obsession with psychic photography which gives the book its unusual appeal.

Photography is utilized throughout the plot and these passages provide a vivid sense of the medium in the first decade of this century. They are also cleverly used in order to stress the obsessive and sinister aspects of the scientist. For example, Baumgartner's darkroom is described in detail, including the large ruby glass window - "so that Pocket looked down red hot steps into a crimson garden, and therefrom to his companion dyed from head to foot like Mephistopheles. . . (his) tense crimson face. . . was glistening as though with beads of blood. "

Dr. Baumgartner's obsession with photographing "the flight of the soul" led him to seek

permission to use his camera at hospital deathbeds and at executions of prisoners, but he was refused. In frustration and monomaniacal rage he decided to murder people in order to prove his theory. His subjects were the tramps and workless who slept in Hyde Park. He tried shooting them and then photographing them immediately afterwards - but without success. Their souls were too quick and had departed before the camera could be brought into action.

Not to be cheated out of his spirit picture, the doctor devised an ingenious contraption. It comprised a large stereoscopic camera with an automatic pistol aimed through the aperture intended for the second lens. The camera was fitted with a pneumatic shutter; pressing the bulb fired the gun and releasing the bulb fired the shutter. He could therefore take both kinds of shot in quick succession, and photograph the soul departing the body at the moment of death.

It was a novel idea and worked very well in practice. But after a couple of "shootings" the doctor still could not find a soul on the developed plates.

Baumgartner concluded that "the human derelicts I had so far chosen for my experiments had no souls to photograph. " Pocket was due to be the next victim but he escaped in time.

Persistent to the end, Baumgartner chooses the only available subject whom he is sure has a soul - himself. He placed the camera on the parapet of the Embankment. "I have fitted the shutter with a specially long pneumatic tube, and the bulb will do its double work as usual when my fingers relax. " So the doctor shoots himself, leaving an exposed plate depicting his moment of death, confident that the plate will be found and developed to reveal the flight of his soul.

Inside the camera the doctor had placed a long "confession" in which he summarized his beliefs, experiments, the value of photography in capturing the soul, and details of the murders which he had committed in his (unsuccessful) quest for a spirit picture.

Even his final experiment was unsuccessful - Pocket accidentally exposed the plate while attempting to develop it.

The Camera Fiend is an ingenious tale well told. It is especially interesting for photographers in its detailed descriptions of cameras, plates, darkrooms and processing. Evidently, the author was more than casually acquainted with the photographic practices of his age. This is confirmed by the number of photographic references in many of Hornung's other novels.

For example, in The Amateur Cracksman, published in 1899, Inspector Mackenzie of Scotland Yard is an enthusiastic amateur photographer "who would talk of nothing but the recent improvements in instantaneous photography. " His ambition was to take "such a series of cricket photographs as had never been taken before" and to this end he "took countless photographs by day, which he developed by night in a dark room admirably situated in the servant's part of the house. "(4) Hornung was also an avid cricketer.

In Stingaree, published in 1905, about the exploits of an Australian bushranger, a photograph taken by an itinerant cameraman plays a minor part in the story. Fathers of Men, published in 1912, about British public school life, opens with a scene in which a young lady is busy wet-mounting photographs into an album. One of the lads at the school, Chips, was an enthusiastic photographer "and so rare was the hobby in those days that for some time he was the only photographer in the school. "

These and other references indicate that Hornung was himself an enthusiastic amateur photographer. (It would be interesting to learn if any of his own images have survived.) Other biographical references occur in The Camera Fiend. Like Pocket, Hornung was a chronic sufferer from asthma. More interestingly, he had a broad knowledge of, and interest in, the psychic literature of the period.

Undoubtedly, a good deal of this interest was instigated by A. Conan Doyle whose sister, Constance, Hornung had married in 1893. The brothers-in-law held each other in great affection and were mutual admirers. There is no doubt that the character of Raffles, the gentleman-thief of The Amateur Cracksman, and his companion/chronicler Bunny, Hornung's most popular creations, were inspired by Conan Doyle's more famous sleuth Sherlock Holmes and his companion/chronicler Dr. Watson. It should also be mentioned that even the name "Raffles" is taken from a Conan Doyle character, the alchemist Raffles Haw. The Amateur Cracksman, the first of four volumes featuring Raffles, is dedicated: "To A. C. D. , This Form of Flattery. " Hornung's wit is often mentioned by his biographers and his comment on his brother-in-law's hero is an excellent example: "Though he might be more humble, there is no police like Holmes. "

It is not surprising, therefore, that Hornung would have been familiar with, and influenced by, Conan Doyle's enthusiasm for spiritualism and spirit photography. Arthur Conan Doyle has been called the "St. Paul of Spiritualism" because of his missionary zeal on the subject. He wrote 14 books on spirit topics, including one of special note in this context: The Case for Spirit Photography, 1924.

Another important source of information on psychic matters in general, and spirit photography in particular, would have been the photographic press. The editors and readers of the late Victorian period were ever-fascinated by any new psychic phenomenon, especially as it related to photography. When Dr. Baumgartner presumed that Pocket photographed his friends "in the body" whereas "I take the spirit," Pocket looked "nonplussed. " "But his bewilderment was of briefer duration than might have been the case with a less ardent photographer; for he took a technical interest in his hobby and read the photographic yearbooks nearly as ravenously as Wisden's Almanack" (the bible of cricketers).

If, as seems likely, Pocket's enthusiasm for photography and its literature was yet another autobiographical note, along with Pocket's asthma and devotion to cricket, then Hornung would have been well acquainted with the frequent mentions of spirit photography - and with the experiments of Hippolyte-Ferdinand Baraduc.(5)

Like the fictional Baumgartner, Baraduc was both a doctor and a psychic investigator with a particular interest in photography. Baraduc claimed to have proved that the soul leaves the body at the moment of death - or several hours later.

In one experiment, Baraduc fastened a pigeon to a board and strapped a photographic plate to its chest. He then cut the pigeon's throat, "the picture of its death agony taking the form of curling eddies' on the plate. In a paper read before the Society of Psychic Sciences in Paris, Baraduc claimed to have photographed the human soul or "vital force. " He placed a photographic plate on the body of a man in a totally dark room which "received an impression from the vital forces three hours after death. "(7)

As indefatigable in his experiments as Baumgartner, Baraduc also photographed both his son and his wife, one four minutes after death, the other 24 hours after death. The "vital force" was pictured stretching from the bodies in a fluid stream which hit the ceiling of the room and arced down again.

It is reasonable to assume that experimental attempts at photographing the human soul at the moment of death, such as those by Baraduc during the 1890s, were prime sources for E. W. Hornung and his plot of The Camera Fiend.

But it would be unfair to leave the impression that Dr. Baraduc was as crazy and monomaniacal as the fictional Dr. Baumgartner. Hippolyte-Ferdinand Baraduc, 1850-1909, was an eminently respectable French scientist specializing in mental illnesses, whose researches into the "vital force," and psychic photography, were published in at least seven volumes and communicated through the most learned societies of the day,

including the Academie de Medicine.

As a postscript, it is interesting to note that research into the survival of the human soul is still being conducted, funded in large part by the legacy of an Arizona miner, James Kidd. Kidd disappeared on a mining expedition, leaving about \$270,000 and a will in which he specified that the money was to be used to seek proof of the soul's survival, *preferably with a photograph at the moment of death.*

After a lengthy and bizarre court case in Phoenix in 1965, at which psychics and scientists made their pleas, the money was awarded to the American Society for Psychical Research. (8)

References

1. The Amateur Photographer, 1 May 1911, p. 444.
2. Hugh Caister, quoted in Twentieth Century Authors, 1942, p. 667.
3. All quotations from The Camera Fiend, E. W. Hornung, 1911.
4. The Amateur Cracksman, E. W. Hornung, 1899.
5. In my own files, which are not definitive as regards Baraduc, there are more than 15 items in the British photographic press about his experiments during an 18 month period from June 1896 to December 1897.
6. The British Journal of Photography, 13 November 1896, p. 730.
7. The British Journal of Photography, 26 June 1896, p. 412; The Photographic Review, Vol. 2. , no. 1, January 1897, p. 19.
8. See: The Great Soul Trial, John G. Fuller, 1969; also, my article on James Kidd's request, "Search for the Soul", on this web site.

First published in *The British Journal of Photography*, 10 August 1984.