

The Romance of Photography

Advice on love and marriage from the 19 century photographic press

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A young photographer rather hesitatingly offered his prints for the appraisal of a world renowned master of the camera. The "master" flipped through the stack and said: "Very good," and then delivered his seeming *non-sequitur*: "Do you intend to get married?" The young photographer was a bit flustered and stammered: "Well...yes, sir. ..I expect so, someday." The old man threw down the prints and said: "Then you will never be a photographer. Your mistress is the camera; you can have no other commitment."

I was merely an observer and the matter was none of my business, but I was tempted to point out that the "master" was not only married but had been several times. Perhaps the old gentleman did not intend to be taken literally but was offering a lesson, the moral of which escaped me. Perhaps he regretted his own relationships and was subtly suggesting that the young photographer avoid marital troubles. Perhaps he was merely a hypocrite. Perhaps all of the above.

Perhaps. But if it is any consolation to young photographers who happen to be romantics, the question of whether or not a photographer should marry, and if so, to whom, was a topic of concern in the 19 century. If the study of history has any validity then its lessons should be useful today. I am pleased to report that the question "should photographers marry?" was answered in the affirmative over 70 years ago. A correspondent to one of the photographic magazines wrote:

Were I asked whether photographers should marry, I should undoubtedly say yes. Before I married, every expedition with my camera was a torture. I am of but moderate physique, and the very thought of a day's outing with a 10 x 12 camera, three double dark slides, and a tripod used to reduce me to despair. Then I married. My wife joins me on my expeditions. She is a conscientious woman, who honestly acknowledges that her matrimonial vows entail the sharing of her husband's burdens. This simply means a mathematical calculation. I, personally, weigh 10 stone 4. My wife turns the scale at 9 stone only. [A stone is 14 pounds: Ed.] It is obvious, therefore, to the merest tyro in mathematics that my wife has to be penalised to the extent of 18 lbs. As my whole photographic kit only weighs 10 lbs., I am able to pass the day entirely unencumbered. (1)

Having answered the question of marriage with chauvinistic logic, and effectively refuted the old "master" of the opening lines, it merely remains for the young photographer to encounter the right, or at least willing, partner. And here it must be confessed that the Victorians were far more fortunate due to the fact that the age of rational science was not yet in full flower. One hundred years ago, the prospective romantic could enlist the aid of clairvoyance and mysterious processes of photography. For example, he/she might have consulted Mme. Le Grand, a clairvoyant by the aid of the Psychomotrope, "a newly invented French instrument of intense power" which could "produce a perfect likeness of your future husband or wife, with full name, pecuniary circumstances, occupation, and date of marriage." (2) She would also tell you whether your married life would be happy or otherwise.

It should not be assumed that Mme. Le Grand and her Psychomotrope were unique. Every major city had its "photo-astrologers," as they were called, who would supply portraits of the future partner. A New York clairvoyant would not only supply a "true and beautiful" carte-de-visite of the wife or husband, and name the day on which the union would take place, but also guarantee "health, wealth, and long life." His advertisement poetically appealed to the romantic spirit:

*Thousands his skill they have tried,
And thousands more he will meet;
In this real astrologer you can confide,
At 126, Bleacker Street. (3)*

London was well served by photo-astrologers, especially in Greek Street, Soho, where a "celebrated French astrologer" would supply "the true carte-de-visite of your intended." (4) For an extra 2s.6d. three questions would be answered. The more cynical, and less romantically inclined, might ask the source of all these portraits, and wonder if they were not the surplus prints and discards from portrait studios around the country. Or the astrologer might be asked about the applicant who received a portrait of a well-known actor, who was already married with a family, as the image of her "future husband." But I expect the true reason is that the Psychomotrope, like all modern gadgets, can have its "off" days.

Photographers were not averse to supplying surplus portraits to clients anxious to be married. Thomas Henry had a studio at 42 Cooper's Road, Old Kent Road, when he was charged with fraud for supplying "a beautiful and artistic likeness of (your) future husband or wife" for 18 stamps. The portraits were produced by his "fasemeter" [sic!]. The charge was brought by Sarah Weeks, a middle-aged widow, and the case was heard

at Southwark Police Court in 1879. (5) Under cross examination Sarah said that she had not been dissatisfied with the portrait and that she would be inclined to marry the man if she liked him "and he was disengaged." The judge suggested that the man in the picture should marry Mrs. Weeks, and then he would be more lenient with the prisoner. And like all good stories, the end is unknown. But it would be nice to imagine Mrs. Weeks settling down with her adoring husband whom she met through the fasemeter. Thomas Henry was lucky. A photographer was sentenced at Canterbury in 1896 (6) to two month's hard labour for combining portraiture and fortune-telling.

A more direct method of contracting a future partner would be to advertise for her or him. The following advertisement from the 1890s is nothing if not honest.

A born gentleman, 38 years old, of medium stature ... amateur photographer and crayon portrait sketcher, seeks, from pure love of the art, a pleasant, wealthy lady (widows not excluded, nor is age material) who is in possession of a large photographic establishment, for the purpose of marrying the same. (7)

Photography magazines do not publish small ads. like this anymore, unfortunately, but perhaps it is time for someone to take the tip. Certainly the very uniqueness of the announcement would assure wide distribution. The more enterprising, or desperate, among you with an interest in marriage might follow the example of the young photographer of 1869 who placed the following advertisement in a New York newspaper:

Marriage a lottery. A gentleman, with house and lot worth 35,000 dollars, for one dollar. Ladies, I am between the ages of 21 and 25; I want you to guess how many days old I will be the coming New Years. The one guessing right shall have the above-named prize. Please inclose [sic] one dollar, and photograph, with number guessed, initials of name, and post-office address, plainly written on back of photograph. I will reply to each one thus received by sending my own photograph; and as soon as the right number is guessed I will call on the guesser; and, if agreeable to both, will give her a deed of the house and lot on our wedding day; and, if not, she shall have for her guess every dollar I get by this advertisement. Address J. Grant, 49 Charlton Street, New York City. (8)

Those with a less developed gambling instinct might tempt fate in a much more subtle way - by distributing self-portraits to the maximum number of acquaintances. The idea works, if the history of photography is any guide. Innumerable accounts of romances and marriages, through the chance viewing of a photographic portrait litter the Victorian press. For example, there is the heartwarming story of the young man, bored and lonely while serving his country in the far-flung reaches of the British Empire. A friend at home

in Scotland, solicitous of his ennui, sent the young man a stack of cartes-de-visite, depicting the portraits of friends and relatives. The result "was the falling over head and ears in love with the portrait of the young lady of eighteen." He engaged a passage on the first steamer home, rushed to the young lady's home, proposed and "gracefully allowed her two hours to consider of the matter." She consented and they were married. (9)

Introductions through photographs were far more common when one of the partners, usually the male, was working in a remote location, far from female company. Robert Gill, for example, taught at an Indian school in a remote part of Canada. He found his bride, Miss Emily Taylor, through her portrait. She made the arduous journey to the Indian reservation where she met her husband for the first time. On completing the formal introductions, they "marched off for a wedding license." (10) Such marriages through the agency of photography were commonplace in the American West where "eligible single and marriageable ladies are conspicuous by their absence." In the mining town of St. Johns, Arizona, in 1884, the men formed an association for the mass procurement of wives, using photography as their "hymeneal intermediary." All the men sat for their portraits and sent out travelling agents, with all the cartes-de-visite, to the cities of the Eastern states. Full details of name and occupation of the men accompanied their photographs, with offers of marriage and all travelling expenses, to any woman willing to wed and live in the Far West. (11)

Again, history teaches a contemporary lesson. Many of these stories of romance through a photograph ended in tragedy or farce rather than wedded bliss. And the most common cause of such sadness was the fact that the portrait bore no relationship in appearance to the real woman. Take the story of the man who requested photographs of possible brides.

One picture came - the charming bust of a lovely woman - which at once settled the matter. The (man) telegraphed for the lady to come, and to come immediately. Not only this, but he sent the money for her journey, and waited on her at the station - all anxiety to see the sylphide arrive. What was his horror to see step out of a coupe a thin, elderly woman, her face pitted with the smallpox. (12)

The result was a bitter controversy, the man taking the woman's possessions as security for the money advanced. The woman sued him. At the trial, the woman insisted the photograph, so loved by the man, had been delivered to her just as the man had seen it. All were disbelieving. In a pique, she grabbed the photograph and licked it. The retouching was removed, revealing the undoubted image of herself. The moral of the story is obvious: be content with reality - too much flattery in a portrait can be embarrassing, expensive and time-consuming. On quite a few occasions the prospective bride or groom would send someone else's portrait in place of their own. One man who

"felt pretty sure that if he sent down his own portrait (she) would take him for a petty larceny thief" asked the photographer to stand in the picture instead as "he had the appearance of a solid capitalist, and was endowed with a pair of whiskers" which were most impressive. (13)

The final outcome of such deceptions are never revealed, and we can safely conclude that the result was rarely marital bliss. Honesty, in photography, and love, as in the rest of life, is the best policy.

So now the young photographer has met his prospective love through a portrait. It only remains to pop (or P.O.P.) the question. Here, too, history has provided the perfect script for the occasion. It was published in Punch in 1906:

During this conversation they had been gradually approaching nearer to each other, with an almost imperceptible rack-and-pinion movement. At length he murmured, in intensified tones, 'Miss Hypo - Veloxia, if I may call you so, let me be your head-rest.' She blushed like a ruby lamp, and then gracefully reclined in profile against his rising and falling shirt front, looking like a delicate red chalk carbon print mounted on best white Bristol board. 'Oh, Mr. Pyro - George,' she murmured sweetly, 'mind my frilling.' 'Frilling,' he repeated dreamily, as though quoting from a textbook. 'A ten-percent solution of alum will prevent any frilling.' Then as his arms stole round her swing-back he asked her tenderly, 'What useful photographic accessory do you resemble now, dearest?' 'A squeegee, George, dear, she answered, guessing right the very first time. Suddenly, like a flash light, it was borne in upon Miss Hypo that Mr. Pyro was about to P.O.P. the question, and she remembered that it was not advisable to delay fixation unduly, so when, after thinking out the correct formula, George flung himself down at her feet on the lower joints of his bipod, her answer came in dulcet tones, like the trickling of gold chloride from a graduated measure. And it was not a negative. (14)

Rereading this charming play on photographic terms, it occurs to me that some of them may not be familiar to contemporary readers. Although the meaning of most can be guessed from the context, it suffices to say that "pyro" was a developer, "frilling" was the tendency of the emulsion to peel away from its base, and that "P.O.P." stands for printing-out paper.

Now that the young photographer is engaged to be married, he/she only needs to learn a few "don'ts" from the pages of the 19 century photographic press.

The first is this: don't be photographed together. This was considered to be a most

unlucky act, especially in the north of England. One photographer, on proudly presenting for admiration a portrait of himself and his love, was told that the engagement would soon be "off." It was. "Since then," he wrote, "whenever I hear of the rupture of a marriage engagement, or of the death of one of an engaged pair, I ask, 'Were they photographed together,' and usually find that they were." (15)

The second "don't" involves the correct pocket in which to carry the photograph of your love. It is best illustrated by this story from the Detroit Free Press of 1897:

'And my photograph that I sent you,' she whispered; 'have you always kept it with you?' 'Always, darling' he said, 'next to my heart, which beats for you alone. I have kept it there since the day I received it.' 'Let me see it.' He pondered a moment, and then said, anxiously, 'You believe me, don't you dearest?' 'Of course, I believe you. Show it to me just for a moment.' 'Some other time, darling.' 'Harold, you are deceiving me. You have thrown my picture away, and are carrying some other girl's.' 'No, no I swear by...' 'Then show it to me.' 'I cannot now. Won't you trust me, darling?' 'Mr. Simpson, all is over between us. Never speak to me again.' 'But...' 'Good night, sir.' When Harold reached the sidewalk, he reached under his coat-tail, drew out a lot of old letters and a tintype, and muttered, 'One thing is certain, I'll have to either quit carrying things in my hip pocket or post myself better on anatomy.' (16)

The third lesson for the engaged man is : "don't be photographed kissing another girl." In 1901 the Manchester Law Student Society debated the following legal point.

A holds a lucrative post in the business of B, and is engaged to B's daughter. In a weak moment he kisses X, and is snap-shotted in the act by Y. Y shows the photograph to B, who sacks A, and causes the engagement to be broken off. Has A any remedy against Y?

The result of the energetic debate was "no." A did not have copyright in the photograph because he had not commissioned or paid for it. If A had an "unfettered right of ubiquitous osculation," so had Y in taking the photograph. There was no libel as the photograph told the truth, and that Y had a social duty to perform in showing the photograph to B. (17)

Another example of unfaithfulness which was faithfully captured by a photograph concerned a young lady who sued her suitor for breach of promise (a heinous social crime in the 19 century which could lead not only to disgrace but also to penury). The young lady won the sympathy of the jury with a reading from the man's love letters, with amatory statistics on the number of times he used "darling" and "wanted to kiss her,"

"look in her dear eyes" and "hold her in a fond embrace." It looked ominous for the young man. His sole defense was a photograph of the young lady sitting on a sofa with another man's arm around her waist. He was an amateur photographer and suspecting mischief, pretended to go out of town one night, but not before he had set up opposite the sofa a hidden camera fitted with the latest clock-work shutter release. Verdict for the defendant. (18)

In much the same way that a photographic portrait was often used as an introduction between young couples, it could also be used to sever a relationship without the risk of a court action for breach of promise. Typical of the ruse was this one, from 1897. The young man "having an odour of the stables about him" entered a photographic studio for his carte-de-visite portrait. During the exposure he shut one eye, twisted his mouth around to the side, and stuck up his nose. It made a fearful sight and a gruesome picture. He was pleased with the result, and explained to the bewildered photographer: "I come from Birmingham just six months ago, engaged to a girl out there; I have found another here I like better, and so I am going to sever old ties... I've writ her that I was blode up here on a boat and disfigured for life. She's awful proud. When she gets this and sees how that explosion wrecked me, she'll hunt up another lover quickr'n wink." He posted the picture with a brief letter: "My Ever Dear Gurl - I incloze my pickture that you may see how offul bad I was hurt, tho' I know you will luv me just the same." (19)

This story must have struck a sympathetic nerve as it was repeated at least four times at different periods, with various locations and types of accident.

Another graphic example of communication through a photograph was instigated by a young woman who wanted her portrait taken while she held a pistol to her head. Her explanation to the photographer was that "my sweetheart has deserted me, and I want to send him my likeness in this position, intimating to him at the same time that I shall pull the trigger if he does not return to me at once." A few weeks later, the photographer took the wedding picture. (20)

The young photographer is now married. But it is only fair to point out that marital strife can occur - and that photography may be the instigator of the problem, especially if the wife is not a devotee of the art. There are many letters in the 19 century photographic press from irate wives, deploring the camera-mania of their men. A particularly vitriolic example was published in 1895. (21) It is too long to quote in full but a few extracts will give you the gist of the letter:

Some day, when the punishment is fixed to fit the crime, the worst thing that can befall a criminal will not be death by electricity or hanging, or even by drawing

and quartering. No, the most heinous of offenders will be punished by no such mild processes as these. He will be doomed to dwell under the same roof with an amateur photographer, and the worse the crime, the more enthusiastic will be the amateur photographer and the smaller will be the roof that covers them...

Only the strongest ties of affection can render his presence at all supportable. He is simply an infliction and a torture. His true place in society is beside the thumb-screw, the gallows or the whipping post, where he would at least be of some practical service.

Another angry wife from a disrupted household wrote to a magazine in 1900 (22) with the complaint that her "unfortunate" husband was "stricken with the amateur photographic plague" about three years earlier and, up to that time, she had "always considered him reasonably sane." She then went on, in an extremely lengthy piece of correspondence, to complain of the wreck of the house, the impossibility of getting into the bathroom, his bad temper, the mess of the chemicals, and the cost of the hobby. She went to wash the baby in the bathtub and there was some water in it already, "and it looked clear enough," but in fact it was a silver solution "that turned the baby jet black." The cat was given milk in a saucer that had been used for "something or other of potassium" and it "just curled up and died."

Facetious or not, these letters do indicate the ire that can be caused by living with a non-photographer. The result might be divorce, or worse. The British Journal of Photography, (23) in the same year in which the last letter appeared, reported the divorce of a photography instructor who was accused by his jealous wife of taking another lady into the darkroom with him. Innocently, no doubt. In this case, the scars of experience were caused by emotional, not physical, wounds. The "other woman" in the life of a photographer called Thiebaut was not as fortunate. His jealous wife led him into the criminal, as well as the divorce, court. A report of the trial stated:

It is a long tale of love, jealousy, infidelity, and vengeance. The wife was charged with disfiguring the paramour of her husband with photographic chemicals. She admitted that she had been in the habit of carrying a bottle of nitrate of silver in her pocket for the purpose of disfiguring her rival. She subsequently threw a quantity of sulphuric acid over her, and beat her severely with a stick. (24)

This brief look at love and courtship in the pages of the 19 century photographic press must not end on such a negative note. It began with a "master" admonishing a young photographer for his marital hopes, and a refutation of this attitude. So a more positive, encouraging ending is called for than the one supplied by Thiebaut and his jealous wife.

In 1884 Norman Macbeth, a member of the Royal Scottish Academy, designed an emblem for Edinburgh photographers. It represented "ideal photography" represented by a woman:

She is seated with a mirror in hand, having a pure reflection of herself seen in it. She has the greatest abhorrence of everything that is false and concealed. She is represented as having torn the mask (which many would live by) from her face, and, being ashamed of such attempts at deception she hides it behind her back...
(25)

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5. The Photographic News, 30 May 1879, p. 259.
6. The British Journal of Photography, 1 May 1896, p. 275.
7. The Photographic News, 4 September 1891, p. 625.
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Published in The British Journal of Photography, 31 July 1981.