The Old Cap Anew:
[Commonplace marvels of Photography in the 1850s]

R. D. Wood introduces some thoughts of George Sala in 1859 about the condition of Photography at that time.

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On 19th November 1859 an unsigned article ‘Since this old cap was new’ appeared in the London weekly magazine *All The Year Round*. [1]. The journalist, George Sala [2], wrote light–heartedly about various changes that had taken place during the previous two or three decades. He wanted especially to recall those things that had not been conceived twenty years before but to which they had grown entirely accustomed by 1859.

Some first examples that came to Sala’s mind were Railways (“people woke up one morning and found themselves in a train”) Railway stations (‘who will tell me that railway tea bears the remotest assimilation to the refreshments under those titles obtained elsewhere?”), ballooning, cotton–spinning machinery, gutta–percha for picture frames, for baths, vases, toys, and whips. Twenty years before nobody had heard of Gutta–percha yet in 1859 it was even being used, Sala marvelled, to insulate a cable across the Atlantic.

Sala had been born in 1828 and even when he was ten years old there had been no profession of photography. But by the time he was thirty he was expressing amazement – and amusement – that photography was everywhere in daily life in 1859. “Try and remember a street as you saw it in eighteen thirty–nine. What strange novelties eighteen fifty nine offers to our inspection! Look

at the photographs. Could we do without photography now?". Accepted by everybody without surprise, it was "potent and various." Yet George Sala certainly felt somewhat dubious about the professional photographer, they seemed even lower than the portrait painters of his youth.

In 1839 we could only go, if we wanted our portraits taken, to the gentleman in Soho or Fitzroy–square, who painted us in oils, with the column, the curtain, or the cut orange on the plate, with an unnatural shirt collar, clothes too new for us, and eyes staring into vacancy. For miniatures, there was the fashionable artist in a shawl dressing–gown and a Turkish cap, who stippled us up in ivory, gold chain round our necks, and a highly finished Buhl inkstand, with a great quill pen to break the dark background on the curiously arabesqued table–cloth. Cheaper performances "in this style" were undertaken by modest practitioners, who dwelt in second floors of the Strand or Oxford–street, and exhibited gold frames full of specimens on the street door; simpering ensigns in scarlet, and languishing ladies with low–necked dresses. Photography has swept all these poor mediocre artists away. Some, the better section, have started up again as first class photographers, or find employment in colouring the productions of the sun and lens. Others, the more inferior, take photographs, abominable in quality, for sixpence and a shilling, in vile little slums; Sunday being their great market day: there are legions of people abroad who have their portraits taken for want of something better to do. Some, the very worst, may have sunk into the touters who stand at the doors in the aforesaid slums, with shilling specimens in their grimy hands, wheedling or bullying the passers–by to come into their masters' murky studios and be libelled on glass. And some, poor wretches, for aught I know, may be picking up sorry crumbs sitting as models for the personages in those stereoscopic slides which look so curiously like life, and so hideously unlike it, showing their bleared faces and crinolines and legs, and playing their miserable antics for a penny wage.

Most noteworthy feature of the things that have taken possession of London is this stereoscopic mania. It is very good, I think, to look on marvellous transcripts of nature, to peep through two little holes at a scrap of cardboard, and say: There are the Grand Mulets, there is the Court of Lions, there is the Alameda of Seville, not to have seen which is not to have seen a wonder. There is the Mount of Olives, there the place of Job's tribulation – not as painters and poets have imagined them, but in their actual, terrible reality –

barren, sunburnt, arid, desolate. See; that little speck among a thousand heads is Queen Victoria [3]. By her side is Eugénie, in a white bonnet; that little dark streak is the real life–like twist of the moustache of his Imperial Majesty Napoleon III. These are not phantoms; they are real, and the sun cannot lie. It is good, I say, to look into these magic mirrors, and the reflective man may glean many and salutary lessons from them; but how does it stand when we come to photograph humanity tortured into the similitude of an ape, or caricature into sham angels and sham ghosts? What a cold pallid glare is thrown by the stereoscope on the deliberate indecences the knaves have striven to perpetrate.

Not to be denied, however, is this great fact of photography: very potent and various in its usefulness at this time. It has taken giant strides from its little dim cradle, full of misty shadowings of corpse–like colour, and distorted parts called daguerreotypes. Photography is everywhere now. Our trustiest friends, our most intimate enemies, stare us in the face from collodionised surfaces. Sharp detectives have photographs of criminals of whom they are in search. Foreign police agents speculate upon the expediency of having the portraits of travellers photographed on their passports. People are photographed on their visiting cards, or have tiny albuminised portraits of themselves in the crowns of their hats. There are photographs so minute as to be invisible, save under the microscope. They photograph infants and dead people. I was in Bedlam the other day, and the kind physician showed me an album full of photographs of the mad folks. There was Case xvi., raving in acute mania, hair erect, eyes starting, hands clenched, on the opposite page was Case xiv again, in a lucid interval, demure, with a faultlessly buttoned coat. Could the old mad doctors ever have dreamed of this, among the phantasma of chains, gags, and whirligig chairs, among which they kept the stricken people! What sore and terrible an astonishment photography would have been to them...

This photography seems an obedient slave, and has never claimed any fierce or arrogant mastery. It has never blown any one up. or maimed anybody; though a skilful photographer tells me that the art may yet exact such penalties for extreme rashness or dense stupidity. The worst harm it has wreaked has been to stain a few manipulators' finger–tips a little. It is not free from vice: witness those semi–ribald stereoscopes; but it abhors the crimes of violence. My cap is but middle aged, but when it covers a bald, wrinkled head, what marvels may not have been added to photography!

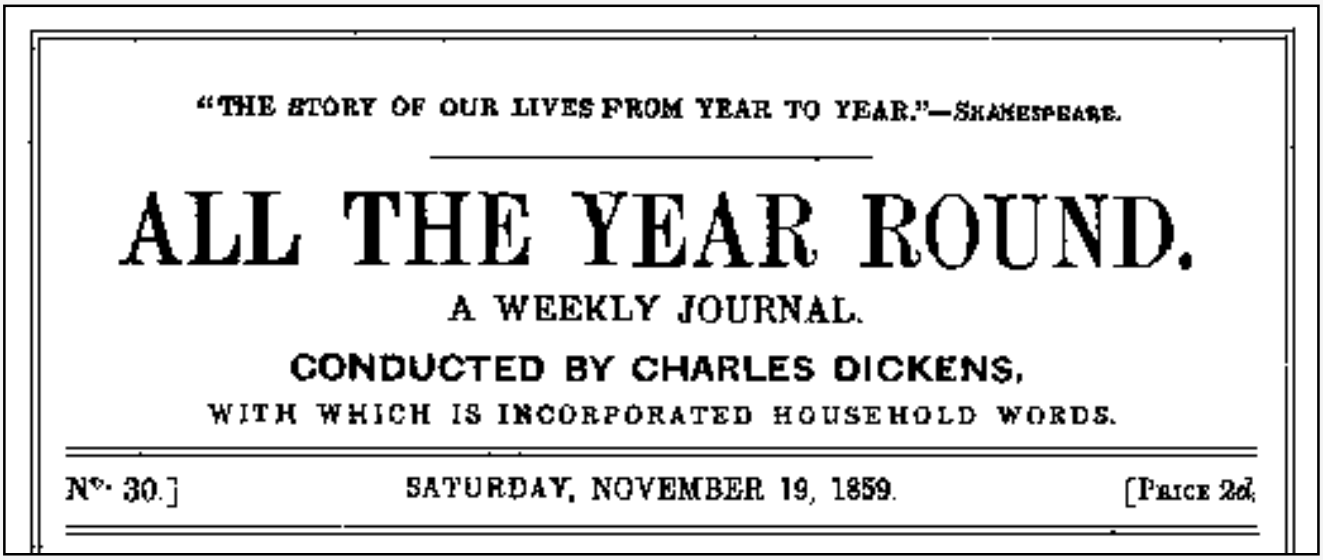
REFERENCES

[These three footnotes were omitted to enable the article to appear on one page when this article was published in December 1992 in *Professional Photographer* (Market Link Publishing: Saffron Walden, UK)]

[1]. 'Since this old cap was new', *All The Year Round. A Weekly Journal. Conducted by Charles Dickens. With which is incorporated Household Words*, 19 November 1859, Vol. 2, No. 30, pp. 76–80

[2]. Although the article is unsigned it contains a comment that eight years earlier the author had published another article 'Things Departed' in *Household Words*. According to a manuscript 'Office Book' of that journal (in the Parrish Collection of Victorian Novelists, Princeton University Library), that earlier unsigned article (*Household Words*, 17 January 1852, Vol. 4, pp. 397–401) was written by George Sala (1828–1895).

[3]. Copies of this photograph ('among a thousand heads is Queen Victoria. By her side is Eugénie...') exist today. See 'The Royal and Imperial Visit to the Crystal Palace, 20 April 1855'', in *Crown and Camera* by Frances Dimond and R. Taylor, Penguin Books (1987), p.96



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