

PHOTOGRAPHERS AND ME

I look in my glass, dear reader, and what do I see? Nothing so frightfully hot, believe me. The face is slablike, the ears are large and fastened on at right-angles. Above the eyebrows comes a stagnant sea of bald forehead, stretching away into the distance with nothing to relieve it but a few wisps of lonely hair. The nose is blobby, the eyes dull, like those of a fish not in the best of health. A face, in short, taking it for all in all, which should be reserved for the gaze of my nearest and dearest who, through long habit, have got used to it and can see through to the pure white soul beneath. At any rate, a face not to be scattered about at random and come upon suddenly by nervous people and invalids.

And yet, just because I am an author, I have to keep on being photographed. It is the fault of publishers and editors, of course, really, but it is the photographer who comes in for the author's hate.

Something has got to be done about this practice of publishing authors' photographs. We have to submit to it, because editors and publishers insist. They have an extraordinary superstition that it helps an author's sales. The idea is that the public sees the photograph, pauses spell-bound for an instant, and then with a cry of ecstasy rushes off to the book-shop and buys copy after copy of the gargoyle's latest novel.

Of course, in practice, it works out just the other way. People read a review of an author's book and are told that it throbs with a passion so intense as almost to be painful, and are on the point of digging seven-and-sixpence out of their child's money-box to secure a copy, when their eyes fall on the man's photograph at the side of the review, and they find that he has a face like a rabbit and wears spectacles and a low collar. And this man is the man who is said to have laid bare the soul of a woman as with a scalpel.

Naturally their faith is shaken. They feel that a man like that cannot possibly know anything about Woman or any other subject except where to go for a vegetarian lunch, and the next moment they have put down the hair-pin and the child is seven-and-six in hand and the author his ten per cent., or whatever it is, to the bad. And all because of a photograph.

For the ordinary man, the recent introduction of high-art methods into photography has done much to diminish the unpleasantness of the operation. In the old days of crude and direct posing, there was no escape for the sitter. He had to stand up, backed by a rustic stile and a flabby canvas sheet covered with exotic trees, glaring straight into the camera. To prevent any eleventh-hour retreat, a sort of spiky thing was shoved firmly into the back of his head leaving him with the choice of being taken as he stood or having an inch of steel jabbed into his skull. Modern methods have changed all that.

There are no photographs nowadays. Only "camera portraits" and "lens impressions." The full face has been abolished. The ideal of the present-day photographer is to eliminate the sitter as far as possible and concentrate on a general cloudy effect. I have in my possession two studies of my Uncle Theodore--one taken in the early 'nineties, the other in the present year. The first shows him, evidently in pain, staring before him with a fixed expression. In his right hand he grasps a scroll. His left rests on a moss-covered wall. Two sea-gulls are flying against a stormy sky.

As a likeness, it is almost brutally exact. My uncle stands forever condemned as the wearer of a made-up tie.

The second is different in every respect. Not only has the sitter been taken in the popular modern "one-twentieth face," showing only the back of the head, the left ear and what is either a pimple or a flaw in the print, but the whole thing is plunged in the deepest shadow. It is as if my uncle had been surprised by the camera while chasing a black cat in his coal-cellar on a moonlight night. There is no question as to which of the two makes the more attractive picture. My family resemble me in that respect. The less you see of us, the better we look.