



## My Life as a Photographer

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*October*, Vol. 5, Photography. (Summer, 1978), pp. 6-28.

Stable URL:

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*October* is currently published by The MIT Press.

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# My Life as a Photographer

NADAR

TRANSLATED BY THOMAS REPENSEK

## I. *Balzac and the Daguerreotype*

People were stunned when they heard that two inventors had perfected a process that could capture an image on a silver plate. It is impossible for us to imagine today the universal confusion that greeted this invention, so accustomed have we become to the fact of photography and so inured are we by now to its vulgarization.

But not so then. There were some who, like stubborn cattle, refused to even believe that it was possible. What an obstinate race of ill-tempered beings we are: resistant by nature to anything that ruffles our ideas or interferes with our habits; naturally suspicious of everything new, we manufacture menace upon menace until, alas, that tragic irony, “the eagerness to kill,” rears its awful head. Why, it seems like only yesterday that one of the learned members of the Institute stood raging in frenzied protest at the first public demonstration of the phonograph. How self-righteously the distinguished professor refused to further dignify with his presence that “ventriloquist hoax,” and what a commotion he made stalking out, swearing that the unprincipled charlatan responsible for such a fraud would have to answer to him . . .

Gustave Doré—now there was an incisive, brilliant mind—once said to me, toward the end of his life, his health and spirit broken by disappointment, “What! You mean to say you don’t know how much people enjoy finding the one tiny flaw in an otherwise splendid masterpiece?”

As the “Sublime fills us with rioting confusion,” so the unknown sends us spinning, shocking us like a slap in the face.

The appearance of the Daguerreotype—which more properly should be called the Niepceotype—was an event which, therefore, could not fail to excite considerable emotion. Exploding suddenly into existence, it surpassed all possible expectations, undermining beliefs, sweeping theories away. It appeared as it remains, the most brilliant star in the constellation of inventions that have already made of our still unfinished century a Golden Age of Science—for lack of any other virtues to recommend it.

*Adrien Tournachon. Nadar. c. 1854.*

*(All Nadar and Tournachon photographs courtesy Alfred A. Knopf, New York.)*



Photography sprang to life, in fact, with such splendid haste that its rich profusion of blossoms appeared at once, fully formed: the idea rose complete from the human brain, the first induction becoming immediately the finished work.

Scarcely had the steam engine decreased distance, than electricity abolished it altogether. Bourseul, a lowly employee of the French postal system, glimpsed on the horizon the first sign of the telephone and the poet Charles Cros dreamed the sound of the phonograph. Lissajoux's waves let us actually see the sound that Ader transmitted over long distances and that Edison recorded for us for all time. Pasteur, simply by examining a little more closely the parasitic worms discovered by Raspail, laid down a new order that made all the venerable old books useless. When Charcot opened the mysterious door to the psychic world, a domain whose existence had already been suspected by Mesmer, our time-honored criminal code fell to dust. Marey stole from birds the secret of flight for bodies heavier than air and revealed to man the new realm that would soon be his in the vastness of the universe. Anesthesia placed the divine power of mercy into human hands, staying physical suffering. It is all this, indeed, that Brunetière chose to call "the failure of Science."

Here we find ourselves well beyond the remarkable accomplishments of Fourcroy—at that supreme hour when the embattled Nation *commanded* that discoveries be made; beyond even the achievements of visionaries like Laplace, Montgolfier, Lavoisier, Chappe, Conte, and all the others. So profoundly has Science been transformed in our nineteenth century by these almost simultaneous outbursts of creativity that it is only fitting its symbol be transformed as well: The Hercules of antiquity was a man whose strength was his large, powerful muscles; the modern Hercules is a child reclining on a lever.

But do not all these miracles pale when compared to the most astonishing and disturbing one of all, that one which seems to finally endow man himself with the divine power of creation: the power to give physical form to the insubstantial image that vanishes as soon as it is perceived, leaving no shadow in the mirror, no ripple on the surface of the water? Is it not possible then for man, who today can seize the fleeting flash of vision and cut it into the hardest of metals, to believe that he actually is involved in the process of creation?

To return to the point, Niepce and his shrewd colleague were wise to have waited to be born. The Church has always been cool to innovators, if not too warm, and the discovery of 1839 was suspect from the beginning: this mystery smelled strongly of witchcraft and was tainted with heresy—the heavenly roasting pot had been dragged onto the fire for much less.

Nothing was lacking for a good witch hunt: sympathetic magic, the conjuring up of spirits, ghosts. Awesome Night—dear to all sorcerers and wizards—reigned supreme in the dark recesses of the camera, a made-to-order temple for the Prince of Darkness. It only required the slightest effort of the imagination to transform our filters into philters.

That public admiration was uncertain at first was to be expected; people were

bewildered and frightened. The Human Animal needed time to make up its mind and confront the strange beast.

The uneducated and the ignorant were not the only ones to hesitate before this peril. "The lowliest to the most high," so the common saying goes, trembled before the Daguerreotype. More than a few of our most brilliant intellects shrank back as if from a disease. To choose only from among the very highest: Balzac was one of those who could not rid himself of a certain uneasiness about the Daguerreotype process.

He finally pieced together his own explanation for it, seeking refuge somewhat in the fantasist ideas of Cardan. I think I remember seeing this theory developed at great length in a little alcove somewhere in the immense edifice of his work, but I do not have the time to look for it now. I do recall very clearly, however, that he used an exceedingly large number of words to explain it to me on several occasions—he seemed to be quite obsessed with the idea, there in his little violet apartment in the rue de Richelieu—the building had been a famous gambling house during the Restoration and at that time it was still called the Hotel Frascati . . .

According to Balzac's theory, all physical bodies are made up entirely of layers of ghostlike images, an infinite number of leaflike skins laid one on top of the other. Since Balzac believed man was incapable of making something material from an apparition, from something impalpable—that is, creating something from nothing—he concluded that every time someone had his photograph taken, one of the spectral layers was removed from the body and transferred to the photograph. Repeated exposures entailed the unavoidable loss of subsequent ghostly layers, that is, the very essence of life.

Was each precious layer lost forever or was the damage repaired through some more or less instantaneous process of rebirth? I would expect that a man like Balzac, having once set off down such a promising road, was not the sort to go half way, and that he probably arrived at some conclusion on this point, but it was never brought up between us.

As for Balzac's intense fear of the Daguerreotype, was it sincere or affected? I for one believe it was sincere, although Balzac had only to gain from his loss, his ample proportions allowing him to squander his layers without a thought. In any case, it did not prevent him from posing at least for that one Daguerreotype of him that belonged to Gavarni and Silvy before I bought it and that is now in the possession of M. Spoelberg de Lovenjoul.

To suggest that Balzac's fear was something less than real would be to choose one's words very carefully. But, lest we forget, an irrepressible desire to shock has always been the fashionable vice of our brightest minds. These originals, who are still indeed among us today, take such frank delight in making themselves paradoxically ridiculous before our eyes that it would seem to be a mental illness for which we should find a name: *pretentia*. The Romantics coughed languidly at us through their ashen cheeks; the Realists were struck with sudden artless fits of

*Nadar. Léon Gozlan. c. 1855.*



candor; and the Naturalists glared wretchedly with that sordid cast in their eye. Today's generation of decadents and egotists—more tedious by themselves than all the others combined—are afflicted with a shrill screech, the refinement of which only serves to remind us that public madness is not a thing of the past.

Be that as it may, Balzac did not have to look far to find disciples for his new creed. Of his closest friends, Gozlan prudently took cover at once; but good old Gautier and Gérard de Nerval stepped into line immediately. "Faultless" as he was known to be, Gautier never was one to pass up a dubious proposition. Did that writer of elegant and polished verse, floating in an opiate world of Oriental fantasies, forget that the very image of man is forbidden in the lands of the rising sun? As for gentle Gérard, shy and sweet-tempered, always galloping off across some fantastic landscape, he was spoken for well in advance. To an initiate of Isis, an intimate friend of the Queen of Sheba, and a confidant of the Duchesse de Longueville, no dream could be too extravagant. Both of them, however, without any qualms, were among the first to sit—quite successfully I might add—before our camera.

I could not say for how long this trio of mystics resisted the purely scientific explanation of the Daguerreotype, which was accepted very quickly by the public. As was to be expected, our Pantheon of the day protested vigorously at first, but then quickly accepted the inevitable and spoke of it no more.

As the spectral layers appeared, so they disappeared. Neither Gautier nor de Nerval ever brought up the subject again.

Dear Sir,

*M. Mauclerc, an actor in transit in our city, has in his possession a daguerreotyped (sic) portrait of himself, which he has shown to me and the patrons of my establishment—the Café du Grand-Théâtre—a portrait he tells us was taken by you in Paris while he was at Eaux-Bonnes by means of the electric process.*

*Some people who know little of the advances made in the Science of Electricity in recent years have refused to lend credence to the claims of this ill-used young man. My faith in him has never faltered, having dabbled in the process myself for a time.*

*I beg of you, sir, to kindly make my portrait using the same process, and to send it to me as quickly as possible.*

*My café is frequented by the best Society, including a large number of English gentlemen and their ladies, especially in the wintertime. I strongly urge you, therefore, to take the greatest possible care with this commission, since it can only be considered favorable to your prospects: numerous persons here have already announced their intention to engage your services.*

*I would like the portrait in color, if that is possible, taken while I am seated at a table in my salle de billards (sic)—one of the most elegant public rooms in this city.*

*I am, Sir,*

*Your obedient servant,*

*Gazebon,*

*Proprietor of the Café du  
Grand-Théâtre,  
Grande-Place.*

*Pau, 27 August 1856.*

On the back of the folded letter, the practice in those days before the envelope came into general use, with the canceled Imperial seal and stamps of Paris and Pau were the words:

*Monsieur Nadar,  
Daguerreotype artist,  
Rue Saint-Lazare, 113  
Paris.*

I read and reread this curious letter, which I reproduce here in the original, unable to decide whether I was more amazed at the gullibility of Gazebon or the knavery of Mauclerc.

“Having dabbled in the process myself for a time” set me to thinking, and searching my memory I found there the names of the naïve café proprietor from Pau and the clever itinerant actor.

Some two years before I had received from the same Gazebon—at the instigation of the very same Mauclerc, already then “in transit in our city”—the first of these sensational-sounding epistles. It concerned a gilded copper engraving, a perfect example of Restoration bad taste, entitled *Malek Adel on His Charger*. Poor Malek Adel, it seems, had been passed around from one secondhand dealer to another before being given shelter by Gazebon.

The eternally “in transit” Mauclerc had probably been nosing about one afternoon at the café, and coming across this memorial to the literary taste of the late Mme Cottin, he shrewdly gasped in disbelief, inquiring of the innocent Gazebon whether he was aware that he possessed a treasure of such unquestioned distinction that all the collectors were after it, and that the only other one of its kind belonged to a M. Nadar, Daguerreotype artist, in Paris.

In some such way, I have no doubt, Mauclerc easily coaxed his favorite victim to write to me at once ostensibly about maintaining the market value of our precious masterpieces.

I never answered the letter and the matter was forgotten. It was after this first unsuccessful assault, at least as far as I was concerned, that Mauclerc charged the second time, pushing his trusty Gazebon before him.

So much for Gazebon, whose establishment is “frequented by the best Society, including a large number of English gentlemen and their ladies.”—But why *me*? Why this relentless pursuit of me as their chosen vessel? Why contaminate me with complicity in such a foul business? Mauclerc, “*an actor in transit in our city*,” what do you want from me?

Not allowing myself to be swayed by what seemed a marked preference for me—an inclination which I nevertheless choose to consider flattering on the part of M. Mauclerc—I left this second letter unanswered, as I had the first.

And so did I bid them adieu, Mauclerc with his eternal schemes, and heroic Gazebon waiting for his “portrait in color, if that is possible, taken while I am seated at a table in my *salle de billard(s)*—one of the most elegant public rooms in this city.”

But this letter begged to be kept as a rare specimen, and I set it apart. Rereading letters like this one at the end of a long and satisfying career is one of those sweet pleasures which needs no justification.

Yet who would have thought that some twenty years later, old Gazebon would be avenged at last and that . . . but let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

Can you imagine anything more satisfying than that hour before the evening meal, after a long day’s work? Driven from bed before dawn, you haven’t stopped

running, your mind has been racing, you've given everything you can, struggling against oppressive fatigue as the day goes on:

I will fall tonight like a slaughtered ox,

and it is only at sundown, when the bell rings, and everyone puts down their work, as the front door turns on its hinges, that a merciful truce is called until tomorrow. It is this cherished hour, satisfied with your day's work—the great human service accomplished—when, restored to yourself at last, you stretch out comfortably in your favorite chair, to harvest the fruit of the day's labor.

But the back door is still open, and if your luck is to be perfect that day, that one with whom you can speak most intimately, who is never far from your thoughts and who thinks always of you, a kindred spirit who has passed through time with you, is suddenly announced into the room. So it was my good fortune one evening to greet the purest soul, the brightest mind, the most quoted person in all of Paris, my dear friend Hérald de Pages; and how nicely our little tête-à-tête was shaping up, leaving fatigue and all the other problems far behind, when, unexpectedly, there came a knock at the door.

"I don't want to see anyone! Will they ever leave me in peace?"

"He has already called three times today, sir, while you were out. He says if you cannot see him now, he will come back later; he says he absolutely must see you."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know; a young man, a workman I'd say, judging from his appearance."

"Send him up," Hérald breaks in—I can tell he has already sensed something interesting.

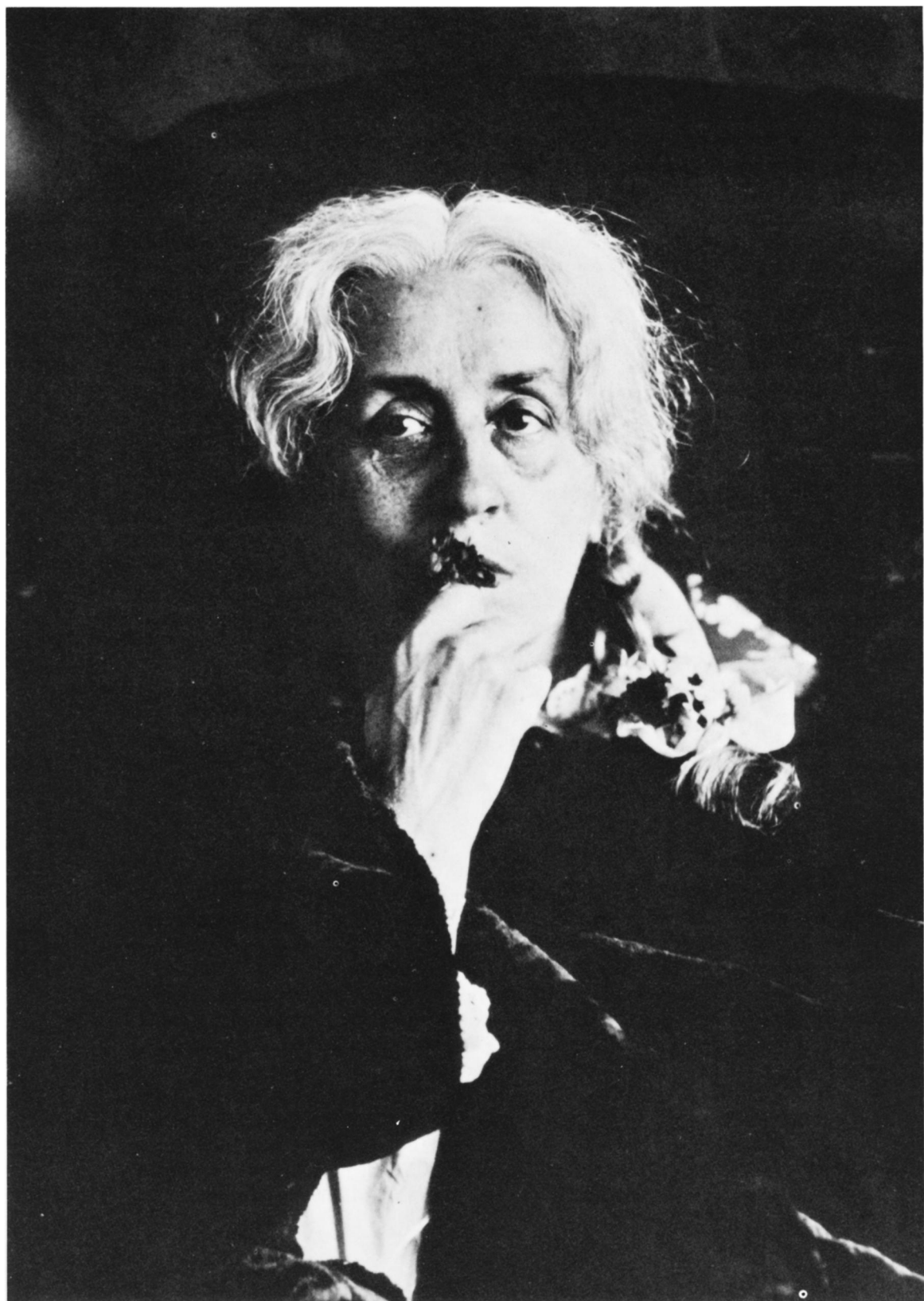
"All right, let him come up."

\*

The young man was shown in, wearing a loosely fitted white shirt tied at the waist, and bare headed. He began by excusing his appearance; he had been working all day and had not had time to go home to change, for he lived with his mother some distance away on the heights of Clignancourt.

He was about twenty years old, at most, a direct, clear look in his eye, reserved, unassuming yet self-assured. He spoke remarkably well, and had none of the drawn-out accent characteristic of the Parisian working class. A fine looking young man, a model French worker: intelligent, responsive, resourceful.

He explained that even though he absolutely had to see me, he would not have persisted if it had not been for the connection that already existed between us: his mother, whose Christian name he mentioned several times, had been in my mother's service in Lyon some years back; in addition, he himself had worked for almost two years for Léopold Léclanché, the son of an old friend of mine.



“You nicknamed him *Farouchot*,” he laughed so good naturedly, “and a very great loss it was for us all, for me, for everyone, to lose him as we did, for M. Léopold still had great discoveries in front of him, perhaps even more valuable than his electric battery. He was very kind to take me under his wing. I feel a great loss now that he’s gone.”

“You are an electrician then?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve always liked my trade, and anything related to it—physics, chemistry, mathematics. I attend courses every evening at the town hall and I read a lot; it’s the one thing I really enjoy. I know very little, but I try to keep up with what others are doing. I go to the shops where I can learn something; that’s why I left Breguet after a year and a half; it’s only a factory; what I am really interested in is the laboratory. I was an apprentice at M. Trouvé’s in the rue de Valois while he was working on his duel-motored electric velocipede. I worked with M. Froment on his electric chronometers, and with M. Marcel Deprez, whose generator, I truly believe, sir, is something remarkable that we have not heard the last of. Then there was M. Ader and his telephone . . .”

“Ah! You know M. Ader?”

“Oh, yes indeed sir; a very fine gentleman, sir, and very wise; some day he will have great things to tell us. Yet so unpretentious, so humble.”

“Indeed.”

“You know him too? Then you know that I am not exaggerating. I was even lucky enough to work with M. Caselli on his autographic telegraphy. Now there . . .”

“But just how old are you?”

“You embarrass me sir; I’ll soon be twenty.”

“You look younger—but let me see now: you are an electrician; you like to read; you are obviously intelligent; you know my friends *Farouchot* and Ader; and you know your way around—all well and good. But you surely haven’t come here this evening only to tell me this?”

There followed a short silence. The young man hesitated, a flush of color coming to his face. Finally, after a great effort:

“I dare not say why it is that I have come to see you, why it is to you and you alone that I *must* come, and why I would have continued to come back no matter how long it took . . . There is nothing more contemptible than flattery, and I want to assure you . . .”

At that moment I must have arched my brow, for he continued:

“Above all, sir, I beg you not to take me for a pretentious fool, which I am not; but what I have to reveal to you is so . . . extraordinary, so incredible, even for one of your experience, so far beyond what is thought to be, that I must beg you to suspend judgment until you have heard me out.”

“Yes, please do begin.”

“I beg you not to think of me as an inventor, gentlemen. I am only a young

man who knows very little, and I don't claim to have made a great discovery—it's only something I happened to find purely by chance while working in the laboratory. You may be surprised by how obvious it will seem. I am speaking, of course, from a scientific point of view; I haven't given a thought to its practical application. I was led to it quite naturally by the recently published accounts on photophony. If MM. Graham Bell and Summer Tainter have indeed established that all bodies can reflect sound under the influence of light, then why do we continue to refuse this gift that light itself holds out to us?"

"And?"

There followed another silence; then resolutely, looking me straight in the eye, he began:

"Suppose for a moment, sir, simply for the sake of argument, as impossible as it may sound to you—but you above all don't have to be reminded that, pure mathematics aside, the great Arago refused to accept that anything was impossible—suppose that a person or an object, anything you like, were in this room at this moment, while your camera technician was in his laboratory, on the same floor or any other floor in the building, unable to see what the object was—not needing to see it! Suppose that a photograph could be taken under these conditions, before your very eyes, over this relatively short distance; would you then grant the possibility of doing the same thing over a considerably greater distance?"

De Pages sprang up as if the young electrician had touched him with a live wire.

Appearing to be surprised, I took the opportunity to examine my interlocutor more closely: his clear, guileless eyes remained fixed on mine.

"And so I have come to ask of you, sir, a favor; a favor that will cost you nothing but that means everything to me. I ask only that you allow one of your own technicians to take, under the conditions I have described, wherever you wish and with whatever model you choose, one photograph to prove or disprove the claims I have advanced. I, needless to say, have none of the photographic equipment necessary, but that end of it has never concerned me.

"Now that I have said it, sir, you see that what I ask is very little. As for my end of it, the little Griscom motor I use—the only equipment I will need—is light enough to hold on my knee.

"I would be eternally grateful if you would do me the honor to witness my demonstration. The profits that could result from it I will not even mention. With absolute trust, I now place myself in your reliable hands."

I dared not move a muscle.

De Pages, in a ferment, sought my eye as eagerly as I avoided his. Clearly, he found me lacking in fervor. Unable to restrain himself, he burst out:

"Do you claim to be able to photograph objects that you cannot even see?"

"I do not claim to be able to do so, sir; I have already done it. But I don't know how else to explain it to you . . . anyway, you will see for yourself. I haven't

invented anything; I have only found something that was always there. If I did anything, I discarded what was unnecessary. Do you remember, M. Nadar, what you wrote about Stephenson's first cog wheel locomotive: 'The greatest obstacle to human understanding is the tiresome habit we have of proceeding from the general to the particular'?"

"Now he's quoting from the classics," de Pages laughed.

"I simplified it, that's all. Only . . . gentlemen, I have a confession to make. In conscience I must tell you . . ."

"Yes?"

". . . that I have—kind as you've been I regret it all the more—already demonstrated my experiment publicly. I should have the review of it here somewhere."

He put his hand into his breast pocket, then, with a frown, searched all the others.

"Damn! I must have left it in the workshop!"

Then, smiling again:

"No, here it is."

He unfolded and handed to me a page torn from some *Gazette* or suburban *Review*. At the head of the "Notes and Comments" column we read, de Pages staring intently over my shoulder:

At two o'clock last Sunday afternoon, in the town hall in Montmartre, a curious experiment took place.

A young man, almost a child, M. M . . . , having obtained the necessary authorizations, demonstrated for the first time publicly his method of electrical photography, with which ingenious process he is able to photograph persons or things beyond his field of vision. The inventor asserted that from Montmartre, he could photograph the town of Deuil, near Montmorency.

His Honor the Mayor and several Council members were on hand, as well as two or three residents of Deuil, who had been called upon to indicate the places to be photographed.

Several exposures were made in rapid succession and the finished pictures were produced at once. The sites represented were immediately recognized by the party from Deuil; houses, trees, and people standing out with remarkable clarity.

The modesty with which the young inventor attempted to escape the enthusiasm of the crowd has only served to increase public interest in this truly remarkable discovery, the practical applications of which already appear to be limitless.

Speechless, we read this extraordinary account a second time.

The very day before, as a matter of fact, de Pages and I had visited the Exposition of Electricity. We had been dazzled and blinded by the miracles we had

seen there, yet troubled by this mysterious power we have harnessed, which will be ours to use in the future. Rushing to serve us before, indeed without, being summoned, always there, invisible, like some diabolical servant, it silently indulges our fancies.

We had seen it invisibly discharge all duties and perform all functions, realizing all the dreams of the human imagination, Obedient and ready to execute our commands, this all-powerful yet discreet servant is unrivaled in all its forms, and is known by many names: telegraph, polyscope, phonophone, phonograph, phonautograph, telelogue, telephone, topophone, spectrophone, microphone, sphygmograph, pyrophone, etc., etc. It lifts and carries our burdens, propels our ships, and drives our carriages; it transports our voice from place to place without distortion; it writes far beyond the reach of the human hand; it reads our heartbeat and tells us what time it is; it sounds the alarm before we are aware of the fire and warns us of flood waters before they have begun to rise. Our faithful man-at-arms, it diligently stands the night watch in our stead; it regulates the speed of our missiles and routs our most powerful enemies; it reveals the hidden bullet to the surgeon's knife; it stops dead in their tracks locomotives, galloping horses, and highwaymen all; it tills our soil and winnows our wheat, ages our wine, and captures our game; it monitors the cashier at the same time it guards the cashbox; it prevents electoral fraud and may even someday make honest men of our worthy public officials. A first-class worker, a Jack-of-All-Trades—one at a time or all at once as you like: stevedore, postman, driver, engraver, farmer, doctor, artilleryman, bookkeeper, archivist, carpenter, policeman . . . and why not photographer, even long-distance photographer?

Ah! dear Hérald, always wanting to believe, your fine mind delighting in any new idea—just like our friend Latour-Saint-Ybars, now gone before us—your face, illuminated by the infinite prospect that stretched before us, reproached me with my silent obstinacy.

Yes, of course, I gave in. I would have relented long before if . . . if I had not been in the course of our conversation, visited by a strange creature of the imagination.

Suddenly, as often occurs with optical illusions and certain cases of double vision, the noble features of Hérald's face seemed to merge with those of the honest young worker, becoming a kind of diabolical mask which slowly took on the form of a face I had never seen before but that I recognized immediately: Mauclerc, Machiavellian Mauclerc, "in transit in our city"; the electric image mockingly reared its head at me from the far distant past.

And I seemed to become Gazon, yes, Gazon the Gullible. I could see myself seated in my Café du Grand-Théâtre in Pau, still waiting for the portrait to be taken by "the electric process" by M. Nadar in Paris; in the meantime, to pass the time, I raised a toast to "the best Society, including English gentlemen and their ladies."

But the young man was still waiting for his answer, not saying a word now, his eyes still fixed on mine; de Pages continued to effervesce:

“Well Nadar, what do you say?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“But what do you have to lose? What does one exposure more or less mean to you? He asks very little in fact.”

At this, the young man, with a smile of sad resignation, replied:

“Oh, no, it’s not that. I understand very well what is stopping M. Nadar. Yet, if he could see with his own eyes that it is not true . . .”

“Suppose I do agree . . . where would you install your conducting wires?”

“When I tell you, you will be more skeptical than ever. Still, in conscience, I cannot tell you what is not so. The fact is, sir, that I have no need of wires.”

“Well! I should have guessed.”

“No, sir, I assure you . . . I am not the first: Bourbouze has proven that tellurian currents exist with a galvanometer. Steinheil used the ground as a conductor as early as 1838, I believe. But the way had been paved long before by the Royal Society of London, when Watson, Cavendish, and a third member whose name escapes me—ah, yes, Martin Folkes!—used the Thames itself as a conductor, not along its current, but across it; they even extended it to include the river bank and some adjacent land. But is not air itself recognized as a conductor? Why do we doubt today what has been known for more than a hundred years? Why do we deprive ourselves of our inheritance? And finally, doesn’t the photophone, that miraculous image that speaks and moves, function without conducting wires over great distances? The selenium necessary for its operation was discovered in 1817 by Berzelius: Why has it taken us half a century to put it to use? Yet it is always as you have said, ‘the human mind proceeds from the general to the particular.’ . . . Not needing conducting wires, sir, I simply dispensed with them.”

Speechless a moment ago, I now was absolutely stunned.

But the battle had been won, and our young man knew it, for, to mark his victory, he added more familiarly, with a candid smile:

“And now if you will permit me, M. Nadar, I didn’t expect to encounter such resistance in a man known for so many daring initiatives; a man who—thirty years before anyone else dreamed of it—predicted the *phonograph*, even conferring on it its name. For it was in 1856, in an article in the *Musée Français-Anglais*, that you . . .”

“All right . . . enough!”

“. . . you who took the first underground photographs by artificial light and the first photographs from an aerial balloon; who in 1863 destroyed the myth of the navigability of lighter-than-air craft and singlehandedly advanced the theory—accepted by everyone today—of aerial locomotion by heavier-than-air machines; you who . . .”

“Have mercy!! Come whenever you like.”

“Ah! thank you very much, sir.”

“When will you return?” de Pages asked, beside himself with excitement.

“I will return on the sixteenth, if that is convenient, at any hour you choose.”

Hérald broke in impatiently:

“The sixteenth . . . but today is only the fourth! Why put it off for twelve days? Why not earlier? tomorrow, or today even?”

“I am sorry, sir; I am unable to come before the sixteenth.”

“Why?”

But the young man was already moving toward the door, bowing to take his leave. De Pages grabbed him by the sleeve:

“But why wait so long?”

“Excuse me, sir, but I am unable to tell you why; it is a personal matter, of no interest whatsoever. I will return the sixteenth.”

“But what possible reason could you have to postpone for twelve days a demonstration that obviously means so much to you?”

“I can only repeat, sir; it is a personal matter and there is no need for anyone to intervene.”

But de Pages was not one to be put off and he continued to insist with such energy that the young man, besieged as he was, had to give in:

“Come now, in strictest confidence, among friends, what is it?”

“You persist so kindly, sir, that I am unable to resist any further. Since you wish to know, I will tell you. I must wait until the fifteenth . . . to be paid, so that I can buy the supplies needed for the experiment. Last Sunday at Montmartre I used up the last of my materials. It is an insignificant amount, only about forty francs, but I am sure you understand, sir, that I would rather furnish these myself.”

Well, he’s finally come out with it, I thought.

This time it was I who looked at de Pages. But nothing escapes the vigilant: the young worker swung around toward Hérald, and stifling a tear that remained suspended in the corner of his eye, he said:

“There! You see, sir, I was sure of it. M. Nadar thinks ill of me. Yet he is my witness: I wanted to say nothing of this; I gave in because you insisted and now I am taken for a schemer, a miserable beggar.”

It seemed appropriate to calm and reassure him; and I helped Hérald with the task. To bring the story to a close, the young man left with two louis in his pocket—but how we had to beg him!

He will return tomorrow morning at ten o’clock, *without fail*.

There he goes.

Since I said nothing, Hérald began:

“Well??”

“So much for your two louis.”

“What do you mean? Do you think all that was only a game, that the boy is a liar, that he won’t be back?”

“It wasn’t very expensive after all. And what a consummate artist: his entrance, modest and reserved, his attire simple and unaffected—all quite correct; preliminary topic: sentimental evocation of the two mothers—a strategy that never fails; the ingratiating exordium, the elaborate oratorical paraphernalia; the endless list of facts and dates—difficult to verify on the spot—which he manipulates like a circus performer; the flattery, a bit obvious, but always appropriate; and to achieve the well-ordered whole, what endurance! what amazing discipline! And from one still so young! Believe me, he has the makings of a future minister whom even our conservative Republic will be able to use in its political horsetradings.”

“But the names of friends he mentioned?”

“Information available only too readily to anyone who happens to be standing next to me or a friend of mine for a few minutes.”

“And the newspaper article?”

“How is it, Hérald, that you who know the world of publishing so well, the founder of the *Petit Journal*, with its more than four million readers, how can you let yourself be taken in by an item slipped into one of the last issues of some short-lived tabloid—who knows?—perhaps out of kindness or with the cooperation of a compositor friend? How can you believe as you do in the printed word—and you an editor? In spite of your intelligence you do seem to have retained a certain purity of soul! But no, all this means nothing or very little indeed; what is truly admirable is not so much his acquiring all this pseudo-scientific knowledge but his knowing how to use it—how artfully and dexterously he practices his deception! We have witnessed this evening a first-rate performance, and I for one am pleased to have made the acquaintance of this extremely capable young man. He will go far! . . . Yes, I admit, I am hard to please—but it was amusing: as you watched me allow myself to swallow the bait. At last, Gazebon is avenged—on me!—and by me!!”

Are you satisfied, Mauclerc! you and your hideous smile . . .

“But, my friend, how do you account for all this effort resulting in only the miserable pilfering of two wretched louis?”

“I beg your pardon: you are absolutely right. We were worth more than that; he could have gotten five from us at least—proof that even the best horse falters. But do you think that it was for me alone, for this one performance, that he set up this elaborate theatrical intrigue which must have required serious study and repeated rehearsals? No, it would hardly have been worth it. What this spirited boy has served us here tonight he will ladle out to all the photographers of Paris,

France, and the world, seasoning his rhetoric as a cook does his stew, according to individual taste, and there is no one too humble, I'll wager, for whom he will not prepare this highly seasoned concoction. Since none of those whom he favors with his trust and promise of limitless profits will take it into their head to announce to their neighbor that they have been hoodwinked, the game will go on without end. Now that is what someone of a practical bent would call a 'racket.' And at the same time, it's a great philosophical adventure."

After a moment of silence, de Pages concluded:

"Let's think of it no more. But do you still categorically refuse to believe, you who encourage—which I find reprehensible, I must say—our very charming but detestable friend G. . . . to repeat time and again his favorite conceit, 'Everything is possible, even God!'—do you still refuse to admit the possibility of long-distance photography?"

"I think it would be as rash to deny the possibility as to affirm it. I remain, innocent as I am of absolute knowledge, floating somewhere in the middle. Babinet, in reply to Biot's atheist proposition, has said: 'Then you are absolutely certain that God does not exist? Well, my friend, you are *even more superstitious* than you claim me to be. I really know nothing at all about it.' In conclusion, I will only go so far as to say, this time quoting Biot—no truer words were ever spoken: '*There is nothing easier to do than what I did yesterday; and nothing more difficult than what I will do for the first time tomorrow.*'"

\*

*P.S.* When we wrote these words, we scarcely believed that the technical question presented so imaginatively in this chapter would soon be taken up in actual fact by our eminent correspondent and friend Doctor Ed. Liesegang, of Vienna. Regarding this subject, see his very interesting article in the *British Journal of Photography*, in which we may finally see Mauclerc discredited and Gazebon rehabilitated. Three cheers for Gazebon!!!

*P.P.S.* This morning the first successful wireless telegraph message was transmitted across the English Channel by Marconi. Is there any dream too extravagant? . . .

Marseilles, June 1899.

*Atelier Nadar. Marie, Princess of Solms.*



III.

*The Blind Princess*

“Has Mme Ratazzi arrived yet?” I asked glancing over the list of appointments for the day.

“No, sir.”

“... *the Princess of Solms?*”

“Yes, but she is not Mme Ratazzi. The Princess of Solms is the sister of the King of Hanover. Her two children—a son and a daughter—came in person to make the appointment for their mother, who is blind. They said that you knew their family, and that they themselves had some years ago been very close to you.”

Some years ago, indeed . . .

In a memoir of this sort it would be impossible to avoid entirely that detestable first person pronoun—it would even be awkward to do so. All the same, I beg the Reader’s indulgence while I take a moment to recall an episode that occurred in 1863, which, in spite of the great commotion it raised at the time, has now been completely forgotten.

\*

It was during my first attempts to take photographs from a balloon—still very difficult in those days before the trail was cut through, child's play today—that I was struck with the eternal human dream of aerial navigation.

Several abrupt descents, during which the wickerwork basket of my balloon, buffeted by light winds and swinging helplessly, crashed into trees and sideswiped a few buildings, gave me something to think about: "If I can't control my balloon in this light breeze, which tangles my mooring anchors, snaps my cables, and drags me all over creation, how can I ever hope to navigate it?"

This fact and the propositions that logically followed from it, led me to conclude that the aerostat—its very name defined its destiny—could never be an airship. Born a floating bubble, so it would die. Those who claimed it was something more had only taken us up a nettlesome, tortuous path that led nowhere.

Still, I used to think that it was man's birthright, since other animals fly, to range far and wide in the heavens.

It seemed to me that birds and flying insects move through the air precisely because they are unlike balloons. They do not rise in the air because of a difference in specific gravity; they exert pressure on the air itself, and it is this that enables them to fly.

Those learned professors, when I bothered to consult them, quickly taught me that flight, in its strictest sense, that is, aerial self-propulsion, is a harmony of dynamic and static forces.

The invention of the Montgolfier brothers was a lofty yet misleading discovery. It sent man along a road beset with pathetic disappointments and ridiculous failures, a route he nevertheless returned to time and again.\* It was necessary, finally—as the homeopaths had turned around allopathic theory—to reverse the proposition in order to extract the essential problem:

TO BE DENSER—HEAVIER THAN AIR—TO COMMAND THE AIR—in this as in all other things:—*To be the strongest in order not to be beaten.*

\* I must ask a question here: How long has it been since that balloon went up one morning in Meudon, without warning, floated over to Chaville, I believe, and returned as quickly as it went, taking advantage of a few precious moments of blissful calm—to gain victory over an *absent* enemy?

There was a minister of public education or rather public ignorance at the time, who had the nerve to utter in peroration to the assembled members of the Institute—to the embarrassment and confusion of all Frenchmen—these disgraceful words: "*Glory to the French Army, which has found the road of the aerial balloon that now stretches out before us.*"

Undoubtedly! Who would not have agreed that this discovery was one of the most precious of human finds? For the fated and commendable inventor never tired of affirming the magnificence of his achievement, attempting to overcome all skepticism with the inauguration of regularly scheduled, daily balloon flights.

Now then, how many times *since* the solemn declaration of that peerless minister has the inventor repeated even once his little jump from Meudon to Chaville and back?

And how much over all these years has it cost us; how much does it continue to add to an already enormous national budget, the abortive ascents of these "floating fish," which do not fly and can never hope to?

It was something and nothing at the same time: only a mathematical formula. Who would breathe life into it? Certainly not me, for I have none of the mathematical fineness, none of the theoretical grace of an engineer; never having been able to tackle logarithms, by nature resistant to symbolic expressions of the sort  $A + B$ , reproached from childhood on for knowing how to count, but no more.

Who then will reveal this great unknown to us; which one of us will set in motion this colossal revolution that will overturn the world of today—think about that for a moment—before which all the pride of human knowledge will be swept away?

But can such a superhuman, empyrean task be accomplished by one human being alone?

Faced with this knotty problem, in which the whole range of human knowledge is brought into play, it seemed necessary to appeal to all inquiring minds, in short, to all who believed as I did.

With a dear friend, whom I have since lost, that splendid La Landelle, and Ponton d'Amécourt, struck alas partially mad—*sapientem stultitiam*—I founded the “Society for the Encouragement of Aerial Locomotion by Heavier-than-Air Machines,” and with the same stroke, in a reverie of enthusiasm, created our own journal *L'Aéronaute*.

They came from all over, inventors, technicians, mathematicians, physicists, chemists, and more—the Corps of Engineers, the Department of the Navy, professors and students from colleges and universities. At first count, six hundred had responded to the call. Every Friday evening these faithful souls assembled to discuss ideas and present plans of action.

But still it was not enough: experimentation, experimentation without end was necessary to create from Nothing this Vast Synthesis.

Money was needed, a lot of money . . .

But where to find it? . . .

The only fortune I ever had was my work, and I would not have accepted even one penny from the government of that day—although they bore me good will, a remarkably insistent good will that I recall, which I must in conscience give them credit for today.

I was the only one to encourage my Society for Encouragement, and I was not sufficient to the task.

The idea came to me then that the treasure I was seeking was to be found precisely in what I was trying to get rid of. I therefore had built at great expense to myself an aerostat of previously unheard of dimensions, the balloon of which, containing 6,000 cubic meters of gas, was able to lift forty-five artillery soldiers—which it actually did—standing in the two-story wicker basket. And I called this monster the *Géant*.

I had hoped the ascents of this colossal balloon in every capital and great city of the entire universe would fill the coffers of our Society, allowing, at the same time, for everyone to pay a part of the ransom of future aerial navigation.

In fact, Paris twice, then all of Brussels, Lyon, and Amsterdam, tried to elbow their way into this oddity. I had been right after all, except on one essential point; forgetting to be a wise virgin, my lamp untrimmed, hundreds of thousands of francs poured in only to disappear immediately into thin air . . .

All my great plans came to nothing, except a grim struggle to pay everyone that went on for ten years.

But this concerns only me.

Dear Reader, you must wonder what all this has to do with the Princess of Solms—well, in fact, I am rushing toward her under full sail.

But how can I resist such memories, especially when I find myself standing again before the GREAT CAUSE, there where I will walk no more . . .

The second time we went up in the *Géant*, we left the Champ de Mars at seven o'clock one evening, and at eight o'clock the next morning, through an error in judgment on the part of one of the crew members, we were dropped out of the sky near Hanover, Germany, some 650 kilometers away. For 28 kilometers in the space of 30 minutes—the normal speed of the average express train—we were dragged bouncing across the German countryside. Try to imagine covering the same 28 kilometers in a half hour, sitting in a basket in tow behind a speeding train, and you can see what a lively little dance it was.

There were, surprisingly, no casualties. One person suffered a broken arm; I fractured a leg and had a few sprains; but my dearest wife who had gallantly chosen—in the words of the canon—“to follow her husband wherever he went,” was cruelly bruised. The other passengers got off with minor injuries.

We were taken in rather great pain to the city of Hanover which was nearby, where we were installed in too princely a manner on the *premier étage* of the Grand-Hôtel, reserved for our little group—by the order of the King.\*

I am unable to describe the concern and kindness that flowed both from the Palace and the French embassy. Baskets of fruit and bouquets of flowers were dispatched by the Queen to my poor wife morning and night—that same queen I was to encounter in Paris several years later, in exile, half mad with grief, keeping vigil over her dying husband in a rented house the two of them had taken in the rue de Presbourg.

Twice a day, without fail, an aide-de-camp of the King came to inquire after

\* These expenses, like all the others, including the specially heated train that we had not requested, were all paid back—every last *silbergroschen*—which the King most *certainly* was unaware of. We also paid for all the medical attention we received, except that administered by Doctor Muller—an excellent fellow—who declined all payment for his services, and to whom our government presented several days after the incident the *ruban rouge* of the Legion of Honor.

I kept all the receipts, amounting to some 6000 francs—six thousand francs!—the cost of one week's stay, including transportation, compensation for damages, and incidentals.

All this by way of reply to the Prussian newspapers: It was because they resented the success of my aerial postal service during the siege of Paris and were trying to get even with me for an article I wrote in which I expressed no great love for Germany, that they all rushed to accuse me then of ingratitude—that most detestable of human perversions.

us. He was a giant, whose large frame appeared even more menacing under his white uniform. I was perfectly free, as he sat at my bedside, to observe that this great body of war concealed a remarkably fine intelligence molded by an excellent scientific education. Needless to add, my presence there in a hospital bed served quickly to enlist him as another adept in our Society.

I had not seen this officer since the adventure in Hanover, when looking through the newspapers one day, I came across his name. I read with regret that Count Wedel, for so he was called, had suddenly left the personal service of the King, and Hanover itself, following an unfortunate duel in which he had shot a duke to death—whose name I have lost somewhere in the *burg, stein, or berg* endings, the ones that evoke the names of old German families.

\*

At last, after being so long in the past, we have finally arrived back in the present: The Princess of Solms is announced. The son and the daughter enter leading and sustaining their mother; eyes closed and smiling in the way of the blind, the Princess slides her feet carefully across the floor.

I had seen the same absent expression on the face of her brother, the King, who was also blind—although I never did find out if their affliction was hereditary. But the King refused to accept his condition; and everyone remembers the innocent deception he frequently practiced with his glasses at the Opéra. He was his sister's twin in another way; he also had a guardian angel, his daughter the Princess Frederika, who never left his side while he lived. Like twin Antigones, both daughters had forever renounced marriage out of the jealous self-devotion of filial duty.

When the Princess had been seated, the laboratory procedures got under way. Between poses I sat with the children, whose friendliness and warmth I was attracted to immediately, both of them being more pleasant than I had been led to believe. They never took their eyes off their dear *maman*, whom they hovered over attentively.

They spent the time retelling the details they remembered of our stay in Hanover: their many visits to see the shattered basket, and the shredded material that was all that remained of the balloon; the questions they asked about the terrible catastrophe; the games they played good-naturedly with my son, who was much younger than they were at the time—he had been brought from Paris as soon as the accident had happened; the Queen sent for him every morning, and off to the Palace he would go. The two of them did not stop asking me questions, inquiring about what I had been up to since then, and what my plans were for the future.

While answering their questions as best I could, dashing back and forth to complete my work, I inquired about a few things that had continued to intrigue me from the time of my convalescence.

And from the rear of the studio, separated from us by a great distance, the Princess sometimes joined in our conversation.

One last time I returned to sit with them, just as they were about to leave. “Oh, by the way, can you tell me anything about a charming gentleman whom I had the pleasure to meet during my stay; he seems to have disappeared since his tragic duel: Count Wedel? . . .”

A thunderbolt striking us on the spot could not have created such chaos.

The two children sprang up, as if charged by an electric current, stretching every muscle in their body toward one point: *maman*. Deathly pale, holding her breath, the daughter pleaded with her hand for silence, and the young man quickly screamed in a whisper, “*No!!!*”

Not understanding, I said nothing.

But already they had turned back toward one another—what thoughts they saw in each other’s glance!—and trembling, they breathed a sigh of relief.

Their mother, still smiling, had heard nothing.

Then the young man whispered into my ear, so quietly that I had to strain to hear: “The man killed by Count Wedel two years ago was our older brother . . . We are able to hide this terrible thing from our mother because of her blindness. But we have always feared—we always will fear—that with the Count gone, she may someday suspect . . . Our mother thinks that our brother has been traveling around the world for the last two years. Every two weeks we read her *his* letters—every word of which she knows by heart—letters written by my sister and me . . . She is counting the days until he returns . . . another word could have taken her from us forever . . .”

Tragic frailty of human existence! All these stories lovingly created, carefully intertwined, and dutifully carried on; the patient lies, the breathless intensity—all could have been suddenly undone, cruelly annihilated in a moment: the tender hope of a mother, the heroic consolation of her children, fallen in ruins to be swallowed up in darkest despair, beyond the power of the human word . . . all because of a chance encounter, a word casually spoken on a visit to a photographer’s studio, in a strange city . . .

The memory of it still makes my blood run cold.