

WITH THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Stephen Leacock

1 'I want my photograph taken,' I said. The photographer looked at me without *enthusiasm*. He was a thin man in a grey suit, with the dim eyes of a natural scientist. But there is no need to describe him. Everybody knows what a photographer is like.

2 'Sit there,' he said, 'and wait.'

3 I waited an hour. I read the *Ladies' Companion* for 1912, the *Girls' Magazine* for 1902, and the *Infants' Journal* for 1888. I began to see that I had done an *impertinent* thing in breaking in on the privacy of this man's scientific *pursuits* with a face like mine.

4 After an hour the photographer opened the inner door.

5 'Come in,' he said severely.

6 I went into the studio.

7 'Sit down,' said the photographer.

8 I sat down in a beam of sunlight *filtered* through a sheet of factory cotton hung against a *frosted window*.

9 The photographer rolled a machine into the middle of the room and crawled into it from behind.

10 He was in only a second—just time enough for one look at me—and then he was out again, tearing at the cotton sheet and the window-panes with a hooked stick, apparently *frantic* for light and air.

11 Then he crawled back into the machine again and drew a little black cloth over himself. This time he was very quiet in there. I knew that he was praying and I kept still.

12 When the photographer came out at last, he looked very *grave* and shook his head.

13 'The face is quite wrong,' he said.



- 14 'I know,' I answered quietly; 'I have always known.'
- 15 He sighed.
- 16 'I think,' he said, 'the face would be better *three quarters full*.'
- 17 'I'm sure it would,' I said enthusiastically for I was glad to find that the man had such a human side to him. 'So would yours.' In fact, I continued, 'how many faces one sees that are apparently hard, narrow, limited, but the minute you get them *three-quarters full* they get wide, large, almost *boundless in* -'
- 18 But the photographer had ceased to listen. He came over and took my head in his hands and twisted it sideways. I thought he meant to kiss me, and I closed my eyes.
- 19 But I was wrong.
- 20 He twisted my face as far as it would go and then stood looking at it.
- 21 He sighed again.
- 22 'I don't like the head,' he said.
- 23 Then he went back to the machine and took another look.
- 24 'Open the mouth a little,' he said.
- 25 I started to do so.
- 26 'Close it,' he added quickly.
- 27 Then he looked again.
- 28 'The ears are bad,' he said, 'drop them a little more. Thank you. Now the eyes. Roll them in under the eyelids. Put the hands on the knees, please, and turn the face just a little upwards. Yes, that's better. Now just expand the lungs! So! And bend the neck - that's it - just *contract* the face, it's just a little too full, but -'
- 29 I swung myself round on the stool
- 30 'Stop,' I said with emotion but, I think with *dignity*. 'This face is my face. It is not yours: it is mine. I've lived with it for forty years and I know its faults.
- 31 I know it's not beautiful; I know it wasn't made for me; but it's my face - the only one I have' - I was conscious of a break in my voice, but I went on - 'such as it is, I've learned to love it. And this is my mouth, not yours. These ears are mine, and if your machine is too narrow -' Here I started to rise from the seat.
- 32 Snick!
- 33 The photographer had pulled the string. The photograph was taken. I could see the machine still shaking from the shock.
- 34 'I think', said the photographer, with a pleased smile, 'that I caught the features just in a moment of *animation*.'

- 35 'So!' I said biting, features, eh? You did not think I could animate them, I said. But let me see the picture.'
- 36 'Oh, there's nothing to see yet,' he said. I have to develop the negative first back on Saturday, and I'll let you see a *proof* of it.'
- 37 On Saturday I went back.
- 38 The photographer beckoned me in. I thought he seemed quieter and graver before. I think, too, there was a certain pride in his manner.
- 39 He unfolded the proof of a large photograph and we both looked at it in silence.
- 40 'Is it me?' I asked.
- 41 'Yes,' he said quietly, 'it is you,' and he went on looking at it.
- 42 'The eyes,' I said hesitatingly, 'don't look very much like mine.'
- 43 'Oh, no,' he answered. 'I've retouched them: they come out splendidly, they.'
- 44 'True,' I said: 'but surely my eyebrows are not like that?'
- 45 'No,' said the photographer with a momentary glance at my face, 'the eyes are removed. We have a process now for putting in new ones. You'll notice we've applied it to carry the hair away from the brow. I don't like the hair low on the skull.'
- 46 'Oh, you don't, don't you?' I said.
- 47 'No,' he went on, 'I don't care for it. I like to get the hair back further and draw out a new brow line.'
- 48 'What about the mouth,' I said, with a bitterness that was lost on the photographer, 'is that mine?'
- 49 'It's adjusted a little,' he said; 'yours is too low. I found I couldn't use it.'
- 50 'The ears, though,' I said, 'strike me as a good likeness: they are just like mine.'
- 51 'Yes,' said the photographer thoughtfully, 'that is so: but I can fix that all right. We have a process now for removing the ears entirely. I'll see if -'
- 52 'Listen,' I interrupted, drawing myself up and animating my features to their full extent and speaking with a bitterness that should have blasted the man on the spot. I came here for a photograph, a picture, something which - bad though it seemed, would have looked like me. I wanted something that would *depict* my face as I was. I gave it to me, humble though the gift may have been. I wanted something that my friends might keep after my death, to *reconcile* them to my loss. It seems that I was mistaken. What I wanted is not done. Go on, then, with your *brutal* work. Take the negative, or whatever it is you call it, dip it in anything you like; remove the

correct the mouth, adjust the face, restore the lips, reanimate the neck, the waistcoat. Coat it with an inch of gloss, shade it, *gild* it, till even you think that it is finished. Then when you have done all that, keep it for your friends. They may value it. To me it is but a worthless *trifle*.'

I burst into tears and left. (*Adapted from Behind the Beyond*)

